

China is Not Moving Toward Democracy

Ying Ma

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“Despite the wishes of the United States or the efforts of Chinese citizens, the Chinese government has so far quashed and neutralized pressure for fundamental political change.”

Ying Ma is a National Research Initiative fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. In the following viewpoint, she argues that while China observers have been predicting that China’s encounters with market forces or liberal institutions would spur democratic change, this has proven to be incorrect. While China has become more pluralistic and multifaceted with the introduction of Western technology and capital, the Chinese government is unwilling to relinquish its monopoly on power. While there are many Chinese citizens who are pressing for democracy, there is also widespread anti-Americanism and nationalism. These pervasive attitudes create an environment less receptive to the values of democratization. Perhaps one day, the author concludes, democracy will come to China – but it won’t be anytime soon.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why, according to the viewpoint, is the United States so invested in bringing democracy to China?
2. Give an example of the government repression and injustice in China, provided by the viewpoint.
3. The viewpoint suggests many ways in which the United States could help spur democratization in China – name one.

For more than a decade, successive U.S. presidents have declared that political liberalization leading ultimately to democratization in China would be desirable and decidedly in America’s – and the world’s- interests. The Clinton administration, after some initial tortuous twists and turns, fashioned a policy of “constructive engagement” with the Chinese government that called for close bilateral economic and political cooperation along with U.S. advocacy for democracy, open markets and human rights in China. The George W. Bush administration, though openly suspicious of China’s opaque military buildup and strategic intentions, has exhorted China to become a “responsible stakeholder” of the international community while urging it to embrace democracy. To Washington, a China that is headed down a democratic path – even as it amasses military, political, and economic might – would offer the best assurance for peace, prosperity and cooperation with the United States and the world.

China, however, appears immune to and unmoved by U.S. wishes. American democratic promotion – ranging from economic engagement to democracy programs to lofty rhetoric – has not halted the speed at which the Chinese

authoritarian behemoth presses on with grave human rights abuse. For now, U.S. hopes just remain hopes.

The reasons for democracy's slow boat to China are complicated: They range from American delusions to Chinese authoritarian resilience to Chinese nationalism. Far less complicated is the reality that as the United States trumpets democracy worldwide as a strategic objective and a sign of human progress, China is unabashedly providing a counter-example. Successful democratization in China, therefore, will not only usher in freedom for 1.3 billion Chinese citizens, but also strike a blow against the stubbornness of authoritarianism worldwide. It is therefore vital for U.S. policymakers to examine China's success in resisting democratization, reassess the tools and assumptions of current democracy promotion efforts, and think of new ways to remove the roadblocks to freedom.

Inevitable Democracy?

Many China observers have long been predicting that China's encounter with market forces or liberal institutions and instruments from the West would spur inevitable democratic change. These observers have been right that China would become more pluralistic and multifaceted. But they have been delusional in thinking that Chinese leader would simply roll over and relinquish power when presented with new challenge to their rule. On everything ranging from trade to the Internet, from village election to the rule of law, Chinese rulers have consistently proven China optimists wrong.

Certainly, the lack of political progress was not what successive Republican and Democratic administrations promised. In lobbying for continued trade with China, President Bill Clinton predicted in 2000, "We will be unleashing forces no totalitarian operation rooted in last century's industrial society can control." President George W. Bush reiterated Clinton's prediction in 2005: "I believe a whiff of freedom in the marketplace will cause there to be more demand for democracy." Just how China is to proceed from "a whiff of freedom" to democracy no one knows. Meanwhile, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) is determined to show otherwise: It continues to gobble up Western technology, know-how, and capital without relinquishing its monopoly on power.

To Washington, all good things go together. If China encountered some element of what exists in a democratic society, many have argued, it would be unable to stop that element's accompanying democratic attributes from seeping into society as a whole. When the Chinese government institutionalized nationwide rural village elections in 1998, numerous observers believed they would inevitably pave the way for broader democratization throughout the country. When the Chinese government agreed to conduct rule-of-law cooperation with the United States on legal training, education, and administrative and commercial law in 1997 and 1998, government and academic experts predicted that any

progress made in less politically sensitive legal areas would inevitably lead to liberalization in the political rule of law. When the Internet revolution arrived in China in the later 1990s, Americans were sure that the Chinese government would quickly succumb to the democratizing powers of the free flow of information.

Each time, however, China showed that it was determined to extract the economic or governing benefits of liberalizing forces and instruments while stifling their political powers. Through million of villagers throughout China have now experienced elections firsthand, such elections are deeply flawed. Many are uncompetitive; many others provide little or no choice over the slate of candidates; fraud is rampant; and those elected, fairly or not, often wield little decision making power. Furthermore, the government shows little interest in expanding the elections to the national level. On the rule of law, though China now eagerly participates in rule-of-law exchanges with the United States, it has permitted legal reforms for the purpose of facilitating economic development and making its governance more efficacious, not more democratic. As such, Beijing has limited legal reform only to politically safe areas, such as commercial and administrative law, and has barred legal reform from politically sensitive areas such as political dissent, labor unrest, and religious freedom. As for the Internet, though China eagerly embraced it as a vehicle for economic modernization and technological advancement, it has aggressively neutralized the medium's democratizing effects. Though the Chinese online population exploded from a paltry 620,000 in October 1997 to about 123 million in July 2006, the Chinese government uses sophisticated technology and some 50,000 Internet police to censor internet content; it regularly makes high-profile arrests of cyber-dissidents and has intimidated both Western and domestic companies to engage in self-censorship.

Daily Life in China

Fortunately, American delusions and Chinese authoritarianism have not stopped the Chinese people from fighting against the government repression and injustice. Economic modernization may not have led to political liberalization, but it has led to a much more pluralistic society, offering many more opportunities and outlets for dissent. Unfortunately, just as Beijing has neutralized the democratizing powers of the market forces or liberal instruments and institutions, it has also aggressively stifled the democratizing effect of increased social pluralism.

Today, massive unemployment and unrest plague Chinese society. Two and a half decades of economic liberalization have resulted in the state's withdrawal from the economy and social welfare network. As a result, the official registered unemployment rate in urban area hovers at 4.2 percent. In rural areas, the unemployment rate could be as high as 20 percent. At any given moment, there are over 120 million rural migrant workers roaming the streets of Chinese cities

looking for jobs. Riots take place in China every day. The Ministry of Public Security reported 10,000 protests throughout the country in 1994; 58,000 protests in 2003; 74,000 in 2004; and 87,000 in 2005. Against the backdrop of unrest and unemployment, ordinary citizens – in particular peasants – are clamoring for the central government to address their grievances on the local level on everything from corruption to poor health care. In 2004, they filed 10 million petitions for intervention from Beijing; in 2005, they filed 30 million.

The disgruntled are aided by support networks spawned by two-decades-plus of increasing social pluralism. Protestors and activists now rely on booming information resources, such as the Internet and mobile phones. Petitioners and disgruntled citizens are aided by a new thriving civil society, which once did not exist. Whereas in 1988 there were only 4,500 registered NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in China, there were 288,936 registered in 2004 and 317,000 in 2006. Some estimate that there could be as many as 3 million unregistered NGOs in China today. Meanwhile, Jennifer Chou of Radio Free Asia reports that China's "vanguard" is finally coming to the aid of its "proletariat." Intellectuals, lawyers, and activists from the big cities have begun to help peasants challenge rigged village elections and uncompensated land confiscation. They have also begun to assist factory workers seeking health care and pensioners, as well as religious believers fighting against persecution. Journalists, members of China's fourth estate, are increasingly pushing against the party line by reporting the pain, agony, and heroics of dissenting citizens, activists, and intellectuals alike.

To the Chinese leadership, economic development continues to be the first and foremost priority. To alleviate the political and social challenges from economic liberalization, Chinese President Hu Jintao has exhorted his cadres to build a "harmonious society," one which would alleviate regional economic disparities, combat corruption, placate protestors, and resist free elections. The government might be willing to tolerate incremental reforms and an increasingly pluralistic society, but such tolerance will be complemented by iron-fisted control of mobilization, organization, and coordination among disparate discontented societal segments. The increasing pluralism that appears as hopeful signs for political liberalization might ironically – and at least in the short term – relieve pressures for democratic change.

Anti-Americanism and Nationalism

Though the Chinese people may be pressing for their rights and better lives in their own ways, they have simultaneously exhibited unmistakable signs of anti-Americanism and nationalism that makes them less receptive to the virtues of democratization.

In an era when the Chinese communist ideology has become defunct through the pursuit of market capitalism, China has aggressively maligned Western-style

democracy as chaos-inducing and unsuitable for the country's current economic conditions. Chinese citizens, argues Beijing, have the duty to pursue Chinese greatness that would result in a strong China, a powerful China, deserving of influence and glory. Economic modernization is key, with social stability as a mandatory accessory. Through its media, textbooks, and propaganda machinery, Beijing emphasizes that democratization, political liberalization, a free press, and anti-government protests will only bring about the collapse of the current regime, and hence are dangerous and destabilizing for Chinese society. When the United States criticizes China's human rights abuses or advocates democratization, it is therefore acting as an overbearing and domineering hegemon and is only seeking to undermine China's rise.

Ideological indoctrination has its consequences. Numerous Chinese citizens, particularly those in the emerging middle class, agree with their government that China is not ready for democratization. They see post-Soviet Russia's social instability, weakened economic growth, declining national power and overall chaos as most unappealing for China. In addition, they are deeply skeptical of U.S. motives. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Chinese newspaper *Global Times (Huan Qiu Shi Bao)* in 2006, some 59 percent of the Chinese people who live in urban metropolises believe that the United States is seeking to contain China, with 56.3 percent seeing the United States as China's competitor. In addition, Chinese citizens recoil at U.S. criticisms of their government's human rights abuses. A similar *Global Times* survey in 2005 reports that almost 79 percent of the respondents have negative views towards U.S. criticism of China's human rights abuses; 49.3 percent believe the U.S. is attempting to destroy stability in China; 10.4 % believe that the United States is trying to make China look bad; and 19.1% believe that America simply does not understand China's internal situation.

In response to the Chinese government's distortions, the United States has done little to understand or assuage Chinese citizens' concerns. Most American leaders merely ignore Chinese concerns about U.S. intentions or about democratization's side effects, opting instead to reiterate the virtues of democracy in abstract terms. As President Bush emphasizes that "every human heart desires to be free," many Chinese citizens, sadly, seem to answer, "Don't be so sure."

The Future of China

Despite the wishes of the United States or the efforts of Chinese citizens, the Chinese government has so far quashed and neutralized pressure for fundamental political change. Beijing controls and stunts precisely those instruments that contribute to the success of a broad-based domestic opposition: It cracks down on political opponents, co-opts potential ones, and indoctrinates the masses. It is eagerly attempting to maximize economic modernization while minimizing its liberalizing effects. As the West awaits the next set of pressures or

instruments that might force Beijing to reform internally or relinquish its authoritarian rule, the Chinese regime stands determined to remain in power.

The resilience of Chinese authoritarianism does not eliminate all possibility that U.S. economic engagement could lead to Chinese political liberalization and democratization in the long run. Resilience, however, makes that outcome much less certain or straightforward and renders America's disposition to simply wait for democracy to emerge in China increasingly unwise and untenable. The United States must do more to spur democratization in China.

At the moment, the U.S. government broadly promotes democracy in China by supporting democratic voices and institutions from within while criticizing and shaming the Chinese regime from the outside. On the former, the U.S. government provides support for a host of activities and projects that include funding for rule-of-law collaboration and village elections, direct financial aid for civil society organizations and Chinese political dissidents, broadcasting of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Chinese language programs, and culture and educational exchanges. To pressure the Chinese government from the outside, the U.S. government frequently criticizes China's human rights record, presses for the release of political and religious dissidents, and publicly and privately calls for the Chinese government to undertake fundamental political reforms.

While current U.S. efforts to promote democracy in China are necessary and important, they do not always counter the sources of Chinese authoritarian resilience discussed here. For instance, the United States should not wade into the quandary of slowing Chinese economic growth and cannot stop the Chinese government from institutionalizing itself or co-opting its rival political groups. Nevertheless, Washington should and can do more to combat other sources of authoritarian resilience by strengthening China's political opposition and countering the regime's restriction of coordination goods that range from press freedoms to the ability to organize. In addition, the United States should begin a serious effort to confront the Chinese government's aggressive ideological indoctrination of its citizens against democratization.

International peace and security in the 21st century will depend in no small part on the future of China and its relations with the world. Peaceful democratization in China will not serve as a guarantee for peace, but it will offer much, much better prospects. Given the tremendous stakes involved, the United States should reconsider the many misplaced assumptions underpinning its China policy. It should recognize the tenacity and resilience of Chinese authoritarianism and relinquish the hope that such authoritarianism will simply and inevitably wilt in the face of U.S. wishes. It should better understand how such authoritarianism adapts to, co-opts, and compartmentalizes market forces and their various accompanying liberal attributes and find better solutions for countering it.

Perhaps one day, freedom for 1.3 billion Chinese citizens will arrive, but until then, promoting liberation from the chains of Chinese communist authoritarianism will remain a slog. The United States should start slogging much more seriously today.

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