

Introduction

Under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China has transformed itself into the second largest global economy, and though its economic growth has begun to slow and is projected to continually decline, its economy is predicted to overtake the United States' in the coming years and become the most powerful economic force in the world. China has been on a path of socio-economic development which includes rapid industrialization and prodigious technological advancements in renewable energy, urbanization and infrastructure development. It has also steadily increased its levels of education and GDP per capita, and has lifted more than 700 million people out of poverty since 1978, establishing a middle class which is projected to grow. Despite this, China has yet to become a democracy.

The question to be answered in this essay is: *What are the chances of democratization in China?* The aim here is to argue that in fact, it has been China's outstanding socio-economic development that has kept it from democratizing. The essay shall present the theories of Lipset, Acemoglu and Robinson, and Welzel and Inglehart on democratization and economic development and illustrate why these endogenous factors do not affect democratization in China. Additionally, I use Wejnert's theory of democratic diffusion to show how China appears to be highly resistant to any exogenous factors that may facilitate the spread of democracy.

Main Part

Lipset

In his modernization theory, Lipset posited that two conditions are necessary for stable democracy. The first is economic development, which includes industrialization, wealth, urbanization and education; the second is legitimacy, or the degree to which institutions are valued for themselves. Lipset found that in each case, wealth, degree of urbanization, industrialization and level of education were higher in the more democratic countries. He emphasized the importance of education in the process of democratization. According to him, higher levels of education broaden citizens' outlooks, enable tolerance, restrain adherence to extremist behavior and increase capacity to make rational electoral decisions, making education the most important factor differentiating democracies from non-democracies.

Lipset stated that continuous economic development, especially higher levels of wealth and education, would facilitate the rise of a strengthened middle class. Financial security and a broadened outlook make the middle class more receptive towards liberal values, allowing those

within it to recognize the importance of democratic institutions and support those institutions. Accordingly, the shift from a pyramid shaped population demographic (impoverished mass and small wealthy elite) to a diamond shaped one (large middle class) is tied to a shift towards democracy.

Lipset's modernization theory reflects the essence of capitalism. In the West, capitalism has led to efficiency and created a strong middle class in Europe and the United States. At the same time, citizens' demands have changed, with governments adapting to satisfy new expectations. By satisfying the demands of their citizens, and providing them with basic services, governments have achieved legitimacy.

China is a special case. Since 1949, the CCP has been the only party permitted to operate and has consolidated support with the help of leaders such as Mao and more recently Xi Jinping. It embraced the tenets of capitalism when its economic reforms were enacted in 1978 and has modernized efficiently. However, it has not become a democracy, rather retaining its ideology of *socialism with Chinese characteristics*, a form of communism adapted to Chinese conditions. It is likely that China's government enjoys a high level of legitimacy for two reasons. First, it has been able to provide many of its citizens with material welfare thanks to its economic power, and secondly it has established a common secular political culture centered on its communist ideology and nationalism. Moreover, the CCP has established an efficient bureaucracy and political institutions, which possess traditional legitimacy due their long-term continuity. It should be noted that China is still in the process of modernization, so it is too early to completely discredit Lipset's theory, however the socio-economic conditions described by Lipset have already reached a degree that can be considered sufficient for democratization, yet communism continues to enjoy legitimacy in China.

Acemoglu and Robinson

Acemoglu and Robinson's theory consists of two elements. First, citizens have well-defined preferences and behave rationally, and second, politics are inherently conflictual because every policy creates winners and losers. In society, this can be viewed as elites vs. citizens; two groups with different preferences. Democratic regimes are characterized by pro-majority policies, which often coincide with pro-poor policies that favor redistribution from the elites to the citizens, while non-democratic regimes are characterized by political inequality that manifests itself in policies that favor the elites.

China fits Acemoglu and Robinson's third path of political development, which asserts that a *country is nondemocratic, or democratization is much delayed*, when the society is relatively egalitarian and prosperous, which makes the nondemocratic political status quo stable. Although Chinese politics is dominated by the elites, and citizens have no political or civil rights, the government still has many pro-majority policies that ensure the socio-economic development of the country and financial well-being of its citizens. According to Acemoglu and Robinson, a high level of inequality between elites and citizens is necessary to transition to a democracy; this does not exist in Chinese society, which has been successful in creating a middle class which acts as a buffer against revolution and aids in maintaining the status quo. Additionally, the Chinese government is in control of all *de facto* (allocated by force) and *de jure* (allocated by institutions) political power, which makes any attempt to democratize China extremely difficult. In non-democracies, citizens have *de facto* power, since they are still the majority, can start a revolution if they wish to, and will be able to overpower the elites.

However, there are several obstacles to revolution in China. The repressive regime makes it difficult to solve the collective-action problem of organization. Citizens can be expected to behave rationally and must weigh the costs vs. benefits of opposing the regime. Even if a majority of the population decided that opposing the elites was a rational choice, the size of China and number of citizens would make organizing any type of large-scale movement extremely difficult, especially given the government's internet surveillance and strict censorship of all media.

Democratization has usually been demanded by the disenfranchised to obtain political power to secure a larger share of the economic benefits of the system, yet China already shares the benefits of economic growth with its citizens by investing in new cities and infrastructure, education and green energy, as well as having a progressive tax system. Furthermore, according to the 2017 Freedom House report, China has been cultivating nationalism, including anti-Western rhetoric, as a pillar of legitimacy and is also suppressing a budding civil society and human rights movements while strengthening media censorship. At the same time, the popular Xi Jinping has cracked down on corruption and is demanding stricter ideological conformity. Under these circumstances, it seems highly unlikely that China will democratize soon.

Welzel and Inglehart

China is also unlikely to democratize when viewed through the lens of Welzel and Inglehart's theory. They build on Lipset and present economic development as a pre-requisite for democratization because it facilitates cultural changes that place increasing emphasis on human emancipation and self-expression. They argue that democratization is a liberating process that maximizes human freedom by establishing civil and political rights and that the most important aspects for democratization are the citizens' mass aspirations for attaining these rights. They hypothesize that mass liberty aspirations give rise to public pressure for growing freedom and public resistance against the curtailment of freedom. However, the Chinese government currently enjoys a high level of support, and mass liberty aspirations are not apparent.

Welzel and Inglehart claim that economic development, even in highly authoritarian societies, leads to development of pro-democratic values and eventually mass support for democratic principles. However, in the case of China, the opinions of the masses appear to be conducive to the stability of the authoritarian regime, due widespread nationalism and trust in the CCP, fueled by the country's economic prowess. Therefore, although the socio-economic pre-conditions for democratization exist in China, mass-level support will not surface due the combination of legitimacy enjoyed by the government, as well the government's own anti-democratic stance and its ability to repress any perceived threat.

Wejnert

Finally, Wejnert examines the diffusion of democracy by looking at the impact that exogenous factors and their spread via communication, role modeling, and/or coercion have on democratization. Her first indicator of diffusion is spatial proximity and density, i.e. the closer countries are, the greater the number of possible linkages. So far, China appears to be immune to any regional democratic influences, which is logical given that it is the most powerful and influential country in the region. Her second indicator is networks, because of their ability to create environments where democracy can spread via communication, role modeling, and/or coercion. However, all political or social networks in China are controlled or monitored by the CCP, which uses coercive pressure and promotes a nationalist and anti-Western ideology to achieve conformity of practice, causing homogeneity and halting the spread of unwanted ideas and practices. Moreover, China appears to be immune to influence from external networks, most likely due to a combination of legitimacy enjoyed by the CCP and active efforts to minimize foreign influence. Her third indicator is media communication, since media exposure lessens the need for

actors to interact directly to share information about democracy, because modern communication tools facilitate easier interaction. However, media exposure interacts with the characteristics of the country and social networks. In China, the media is state controlled, censored, and members of undesirable social networks are arrested and prosecuted. Thus, media communication does not facilitate democratization in China.

Wejnert shows that democratization does not necessarily have to come from endogenous structural conditions; instead she claims that exogenous effects are the strongest predictor of democratic growth; they can trigger events or processes that can have a major impact in democratization. However, China appears to be nearly immune to exogenous effects, combating active ways of democratic diffusion and appearing to be highly resistant to passive ways as well.

Conclusion

Given the arguments that have been provided, it appears that democratization in China will not take place in the foreseeable future.

Communism has been an integral part of modern China since its earliest days when it became identified with nationalism during the British colonial rule. Legitimization occurred under the CCP due to the country's remarkable socio-economic development. As such, China has been able to avoid giving its citizens civil and political rights because they have been content with reaping the benefits of the country's economic growth: a growth that is projected to continue. To the rational Chinese citizen, the cost-benefit scenario of protesting and fighting the government to obtain civil and political rights does not make sense, especially given the governments' de facto and de jure power, as well as the costs of collective-action within a repressive regime. Furthermore, the legitimacy enjoyed by the CCP is cemented by a widespread nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric. In the case of China, economic development and the political culture seem to be pushing citizens away from any mass liberty aspirations.

Not only is China's internal climate not conducive to democracy, it also appears highly immune to external democratic influences. The CCP's nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric contributes in a passive way by fostering pride of their country and skepticism of Western ideologies. In a more active manner, the Chinese government has been using media censorship and internet surveillance to suppress anybody and anything deemed politically sensitive or incorrect. In conclusion, the chances that China will democratize soon are slim. However, there are some things that I would like to remark on as possible future developments.

Currently, although the Chinese see no need to democratize, I can see three potential paths that could lead to a legitimacy crisis in China.

The most proximate cause would be a currently unforeseeable triggering event that would affect most Chinese citizens and lower their support for the government. In autocratic societies such as China, it is risky to voice an opinion, and one must weigh the costs vs. benefits of doing so. However, such triggering events can change a person's rationale, as was the case for many people during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 or the Arab Spring.

The second is not so much a path but a catalyst that may facilitate democratization. I am referring to technological advancements that would eliminate any possibility of government surveillance and allow for collective-action organization and free speech in China.

Finally, the third and most likely path to democratization comes from the people themselves. The Chinese middle class is still growing and much of it consists of people who witnessed the rise of the Chinese economy, were lifted out of poverty by the CCP and support it as a result. They do not take financial security, material wealth and educational privileges for granted. However, what will happen once one or two generational shifts occur and the children who were born into the middle class with all the socio-economic benefits that come with that are old enough to make decisions? Will they still settle for the status quo or will they desire political and civil rights?

I have argued that the current chances of democratization in China appear quite low, however, the future remains unpredictable.

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