

With or Without the Chinese People?

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How do Chinese intellectuals construe social instability? This essay maps out the debate on democracy in early 21st century China and explains how, despite diverse viewpoints, widespread elitist views describe common citizens as obstacles to rapid democratization.

The debate on political reform in Chinese universities reveals, within the boundaries dictated by (self-)censorship, the academic elites' aspirations for change in their great diversity and the main obstacles to drastic political change. Therefore, undertaking the mapping of this debate allows us to have a grasp of the various conceptions Chinese academics have of the current regime, to identify the fault lines that have materialized since the June Fourth repression, and to make sense of their disagreements. Analysing these scholars' discussions, which both have an impact on political elites and public opinion and reflect their respective earnings and fears even if in a distorted manner, is an engaging angle to grasp the diversity of approaches to the issue of China's democratization but also of social instability, which is often put forward as an obstacle to democratization.

This essay is based on twenty qualitative interviews with academics who have taken part in the debate on the political reform yet to come¹. It explores representations of democracy and instability among Chinese intellectuals, and aims at understanding the connection between the two.

Representations of Democracy

To Chinese intellectual elites (apart from paternalistic and elitist exceptions like Pan Wei, Kang Xiaoguang or Jiang Qing) the political horizon of China amounts to its regime and society's democratization (*minzhuhua*). The disagreements between liberals, deploring the freezing of political reform, and the New Left, prioritizing social reform, are profound. But both camps call for democratization, which will finally complete the opening to the market launched in 1978. However intellectuals are divided on how to find the right way to cross the famous river Deng Xiaoping referred to (*mozhe shitou guo he*, "crossing the river by groping for stones"), which corresponds to the country's modernization and opening to the world, and to the necessary distance to join the community of developed nations. The concept of democracy is "essentially contested" – i.e. open to competing interpretations and

¹ Conceptual historians of politics have stressed the importance of taking into account « systems of representations in order to understand the way a generation, a country, or social groups lead their actions and consider their future ». Pierre Rosanvallon, 1986, "Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique", *Revue de synthèse (Questions d'histoire intellectuelle)*, n° 1-2, pp. 93-105

referring to different political perspectives and competing philosophical or anthropological conceptions² – which helps explain such a consensus on China's democratic horizon among intellectual elites.

Chinese scholars criticize liberal representative democracy and renew these debates in the light of recent evolutions. The first of the seven criteria that Gallie puts forward to define essentially contested concepts is the appraisiveness, or judgment, that is attached to it. As a result, when Chinese academics agree on the democratic future of China, they simply agree on the fact that the Chinese political system must improve. "Democracy" is understood in the broad sense of a system that is more open, fair and free. However, when we talk about democracy, we do not limit ourselves to the positive value of the concept of democracy. As William Connolly states, when we designate a political system as a democracy, we "ascribe a value to it" but we also, and above all, try to describe it. And the values various Chinese intellectuals tend to ascribe to the concept of democracy differ quite tellingly, depending on their ideological leanings, and on their representation of social instability.

A Neo-Conservative Democracy to Avoid Instability

The main characteristics of conservatism can be defined as call for order, careful and gradual reforms, and references to history and traditions. We find all these ingredients in the intellectual discourse on political reform. Although the revival of tradition is a defining feature of conservative thinking, this essay tackles the first two characteristics only.

Let us first focus on order. Democracy – in its 20th century definition, i.e. a regime that guarantees every adult citizen the right to take part in the decision-making process – was basically accepted among the Chinese intellectual elites of the 1980s as the outcome of the political reform that would crown the on-going economic reform. Since the 1990s and the "neo-conservative" tidal wave that carried most of the intellectual elites in its wake, it has no longer been the case. To their minds, for China's democratization to succeed and last – roughly matching the conditions established by Western theorists of modernization –, a number of conditions must apply, namely a relatively high level of economic development, a dynamic "civil society," and a strong civic culture. This first and foremost involves maintaining social stability. If these conditions are not met, social instability is bound to worsen and consequently threaten the economic and political stability necessary for political reform to be successful. According to Xiao Gongqin, who theorized the neo-authoritarian movement of the 1980s and the neo-conservative movement of the 1990s, liberal democracy is the best regime for China, once the conditions for a successful democratization are met, i.e. a good level of economic development and urbanization, and the emergence of middle classes. This discourse on the conditions to the introduction of democratic institutions is no novelty in China. It is actually very reminiscent of Liang Qichao's writings after his stay in the US:

Were we now to resort to rule by [freedom, constitutionalism, republicanism; the general terms which describe majority rule], it would be the same as committing national suicide. Freedom, constitutionalism, republicanism – this would be like wearing summer garb in winter, or furs in summer: beautiful, to be

² W.B. Gallie « Essentially Contested Concepts », *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol.56, 1956

sure, but unsuitable. No more am I dizzy with vain imaginings; no longer will I tell a tale of pretty dreams. In a word, the Chinese people must for now accept authoritarian rule; they cannot enjoy freedom... Those born in the thundering tempests of today, forged and molded by iron and fire – they will be my citizens, twenty or thirty, nay, fifty years hence. Then we will give them Rousseau to read, and speak to them of Washington.³

Among the intellectual elites, there is generalized awareness that reformed China is undergoing a deep crisis. Whatever their convictions and disagreements, they all issue the same warning: the country could easily slip into chaos (*hunluan*) and disintegrate. Under a patriotic impulse, most intellectuals and researchers have wilfully rallied to try and meet these times of emergency; but they have endorsed differing approaches to solving the crisis.

The second main conservative characteristic of Chinese intellectual discourse is the call for gradualism. It is patent in Chinese academics' theoretical justification of the realism and pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping's reform policy. Gradualism, a meeting point for academics and government after the 1989 repression, remains attractive: over the past few years, it has been a key feature of the growing literature devoted to defining a "Chinese model" (*zhongguo moshi*) of development. Xiao Gongqin thus describes the trial-and-error method (*shicuo xingzhi*) as the key feature in the Sino-Vietnamese reform model. Those who indulge in the China model description justify their endeavour as resulting from the desire to understand the Chinese path, thereby identifying the ingredients of China's success, at least as far as economy is concerned. They often introduce the Chinese method as a result of the size of the Chinese population and territory: trial and error is thus preferred to shock therapy. This cautious and prudent path is constantly contrasted with drastic changes likely to stir social instability.

What sets Chinese liberals apart from the overall conservative thinking, even though most of them refer to the need for careful and gradual reforms to avoid major social instability and general chaos, is that their definition of the Chinese political reform roughly corresponds to the introduction of the institutions of a so-called Western democracy, even though it does not amount to a complete and unqualified transplant, as their caricatures wrongly suggest. Thus, to liberals, reforms have been numerous over the past thirty years but none of them was political. They have not contributed to making the Chinese regime more democratic, i.e. they have not encouraged its evolution towards electoral and constitutional democracy. Therefore, should political leaders lose public support; there is no peaceful way for the people to safely get rid of them (minimal definition of democracy, especially by Schumpeter). What is more, liberals advocate that political reform is independent from the advances of both economic and social reform, but that on the contrary, it is a necessary condition of their success. Indeed, according to Qin Hui or Hu Ping, privatization is conducted in China without the people's involvement or control. How could a Chinese welfare state even be conceived of if no one can stop the sheer robbery of public goods?⁴ The Chinese liberal stance might be likened to the adherence to "optimistic" principles spread by *democratization studies*, at the time of the third

³ See Nathan, Andrew James, *Chinese Democracy*. University of California Press, 1986

⁴ Hu Ping, *Chine : à quand la démocratie ? Les illusions de la modernisation*, L'aube, 2007, 2^e édition, p. 40 ; Qin Hui, « Dividing the big family assets », *New Left Review*, n°20, 2003.

wave of democratization (roughly from 1974 on). Note, however, that the New Left claims it is not anti-liberal. It rather defines itself as liberal, in that it does not oppose market economy or the defence of human rights. In Pierre Rosanvallon's terms, as opposed to those who claim to be Chinese liberals, the New Left does not uphold the two doctrines of political liberalism at the same time. The New Left does not oppose market economy but does not adhere to utopian liberalism, i.e. the democratic anarchism corresponding to the politics of Adam Smith's principles.⁵ It purports to defend a positive brand of liberalism, which they present as crucial to limit social instability; that is the protection of human rights, which they claim to extend to economic and social rights.

Formal Democracy vs. Extended Democracy

Proponents of the Chinese New Left have long criticized a lack of state intervention in market regulations while highlighting the need for the implementation of social policy. To them, these provide not only a necessary compensation for those who were harmed by state reforms, but also a way of reducing various inequalities. In the 1990s, they attracted attention and became known as the New Left as they insisted on the gravity of the geographical and social inequalities created by the Reform policy and explicitly framing these inequalities to leaders as a very serious potential trigger for social instability.

They are now more optimistic, as they see the Chinese government on the road to its final goal of « extended democracy » (*guangfan de minzhu*), which will give more power to the people and allow for a more equal society. Indeed, Hu-Wen's government has launched a wide plan of action along the lines of the hackneyed "building a harmonious society" motto (*jianshe hexie shehui*). It involves a rather impressive list of social reforms that aim at rebuilding a social security system, with higher pensions and fewer taxes on peasants. These reforms are meant as a reaction against a growing state of unrest reacting to the blatant inequalities brought about by the progress of economic reforms in the country. These reforms are meant to address feelings of insecurity among the Chinese population, who save more than fifty per cent of their income to make up for the shortcomings of social welfare and the rising costs of education and housing. Thus in October 2007, President Hu Jintao himself opened the Party's 17th Congress by stating that without social reforms, notably in the domain of health, China would not continue to grow at its current rate, given that the majority of its population was currently forced to save vast sums of money which should be used for consumption or investment instead. This highlights the pragmatic motivations behind the Party's new social orientation.

Yet, the recent criticisms of the European welfare state by some Chinese officials are vivid reminders of the influence of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman's liberal ideas in the most powerful Chinese circles. In November 2011, Jin Liqin argued on Al Jazeera that the problems currently plaguing Europe were due to "an exhausted welfare state. Labour law makes for sloth and idleness."⁶ The fact that most Chinese leaders believe in these theories does not abide well for a distributive revolution in the future. As a matter of fact, social reforms have only been implemented unequally in certain areas of the country and Yao Yang claims that local

⁵ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le libéralisme économique: histoire de l'idée de marché*, Points, Seuil, 1989.

⁶ Jin Liqin, former vice Finance Minister, currently is the President of China Investment Corporation (CIC). <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2011/11/2011114434664695.html>

governments need incentives from the state to implement them. The central government's new reliance on the mottoes of the harmonious society, of new socialist campaigns and of a scientific conception of development, points to a certain recognition on its part that thirty years of economic reforms have created problems that must now be dealt with. But it does not mean the problems have been solved yet.

Academics from the New Left are looking to extend the definition of democracy so that it is at least as social as it is political. For New Left academics, economic democracy and social justice should indeed take precedence over political democracy.⁷ Wang Shaoguang questions for instance the importance of elections, which he sees as an abstract method that does not truly contribute to reducing social inequalities. A good government under which citizens can take an active part in decision making cannot come into being through elections alone. Wang Shaoguang claims that it is important to make a distinction between electoral democracy and democracy in general. "Democracy means that it is the people who are in power. Electoral democracy merely means that a selection has taken place, as in Supergirl."⁸ Along with Gan Yang, he thus promotes the idea of "substantial democracy". This coincidence or non-coincidence of democracy with election is a major dividing line among Chinese intellectuals, and it is very interesting to notice how the New Left echoes arguments about the crisis of representation in Western democracies and the criticism of what is known as electocracy (*xianzhu*).⁹ These Chinese academics have a good command of Western debates on the "crisis of democracy" and its essential contradictions, but they also have in-depth knowledge of theories questioning the single-handed effectiveness of elections as an expression of the will of the people. Their argument is that elections are not the most powerful tool to guarantee the social stability China so urgently needs to develop and reform peacefully.

Is « Extended » Democratization a Way to Maintain Social Stability?

From a strictly liberal point of view, no democratization is taking place in China. Liberals who live and work in the Mainland cannot express themselves as much on that point as intellectuals who live abroad like Hu Ping. They reject the idea that a gradual reform is taking place as regards freedom of expression, for instance, despite the explosion of the number of publications, the improvement of freedom of the press and the vivacity of political discussions on Internet forums. "Once a government has killed enough people to guarantee its authority, they can reduce the number of people killed. That's the reason why we cannot consider that the least quantitative reduction of repression mechanically amounts to breakthroughs in the progressive evolution towards democracy".¹⁰

It is interesting to see that New Leftists tend to have a positive conception of social movements as compelling the Chinese government at different levels to gradually reform and become more democratic. To them, institutional innovations are

⁷ Gan Yang, « zhongguo ziyou zuopai de youlai » in Chen Zuwei et Liang Wentao, *Zhengzhi lilun zai zhongguo*, Oxford University Press, 2001

⁸ « Jianli yi ge qiang youlide minzhu guojia : yu Wang Shaoguang de duihua » in Ma Ya, *Zhanlue gaodu: zhongguo sixiangjie fangtan lu*, Sanlian shudian, 2008

⁹ Electocracy is basically defined as the reduction of democracy to electoral procedures. Lani Guinier "Beyond electoral democracy: rethinking the political representative as powerful stranger", *Modern law review*, Vol.71, n°4

¹⁰ Hu Ping, *Chine : à quand la démocratie ? Les illusions de la modernisation*, L'aube, 2007, 2^e édition, p. 34

therefore taking place in China, which indicates that the regime is evolving towards more people's participation to decision-making. As a result, they somehow echo the official discourse on inner-party democratization (*dangnei minzhu*). They also publicize the idea that institutional innovations take place in China and that various experiences of participative (In Zhejiang and Heilongjiang, participative budgeting experiences have taken place¹¹), deliberative or direct democracy, reveal a growing responsiveness to the diverse demands and interests expressed in Chinese society.

The optimism of New Left scholars stems from their conviction that leaders have become aware that only transparency, openness and responsiveness can solve the governance crisis China now faces. Based on Bernard Manin, Machiavel and Gramsci, Cui Zhiyuan, for whom leaders' responsiveness is one of the pivotal aspects of democratization, finds interest in a mixed constitution system combining government by one (the king in the worst case, a benevolent leader in the best scenario), government by a minority (or aristocracy) and government by the majority (the people). Transplanted in China, this constitution would manage interactions between the central government, the elites (local governments and capitalists) and the whole population for the benefit of all. Such a system is deemed democratic since it is designed to turn popular demands into national policy and to prevent a new aristocracy and the alliance between the state and various interest groups from emerging.

Access to information certainly is an essential democratic aspect, but it must be associated with all citizens' freedom of expression. Despite regular publicized cases of censorship, scholars like Wang Shaoguang think the situation is improving, especially as the development of the Internet has had a definite impact on public opinion, the traditional press and public policies. In an article focusing on the evolution of means to impact the Chinese government's political agenda, Wang states that with the exploding number of Internet users in China and the vivacious exchanges on discussion forums, Chinese leaders have been forced to pay more attention to the activity and opinion of Internet-users. As a result, the Information Section of the First Secretariat Bureau under the General Office of the State Council began to edit and submit excerpts of online Information to the State Council leaders on a daily basis. Young educated urban-dwellers, who are the great majority of Chinese Internet users, feel concerned by political and social issues. And, without other official channels than *xinfang*¹² to absorb and canalize citizen expression and participation, the Internet and mobile phones have become natural outlets. Virtual convulsions of public opinion are not systematically targeted by censorship as they are not necessarily directed against the system. On the contrary, these citizen manifestations undoubtedly help the central government understand public expectations better and supervise government agencies and local authorities to anticipate and avoid social instability.

Consequently, outside the most liberal circles, the idea that China is now slowly democratizing prevails. For our discussion today, what is interesting is that this is constantly associated with the uttermost principle of maintaining social stability.

¹¹ He Baogang, « Civic engagement through participatory budgeting in China : Three different logics at work », *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 31, n°2, April 2011

¹² The *xinfang*, literally "letters and visits", is a system of administrative petitioning that receives more than 13 Million requests a year.

To the scholars who are involved in the debate on political reform, the fear of social unrest is seen as a motor for change, and as a result progress has been made in terms of political participation, transparency, leaders' responsiveness and the protecting the interests of Chinese citizens.

New Categories to Describe Chinese Intellectuals

This brief panorama of the debate on democratization in Chinese universities these last twenty years has allowed us to reveal the fact that despite the diversity of the arguments mobilized by the different ideological trends that emerged with the fragmenting of intellectual elites after 1989, all constantly refer to social instability as a major concern and as a reason for change. Liberals claim to follow the classical liberal doctrine while taking up more recent arguments developed by transition studies and democratic promotion. They advocate the immediate adoption of a full market economy, universal suffrage competitive elections at all level and a constitution that guarantees citizens' individual freedoms, which is presented as the best recipe to quell the growing social unrest. Neoconservatives like Xiao Gongqin claim to have the same objective but add that a thirty to sixty-year authoritarian transition is first needed, relying on historical analyses, on arguments on people's capacity but also on some elements of modernization theory. They insist that sudden introduction of elections would stir massive social instability. The New Left combines traditional criticism of political representation with Marxist and much more contemporary arguments on the necessity to extend and complexify democracy, which gives it a much more optimistic outlook on social expression, social reform and scattered institutional experiences currently taking place in China.

As we have seen, democracy is widely perceived by Chinese intellectuals as China's political horizon, but their understanding of the concept often precludes elections and elitism prevails in intellectual circles, even among New Left thinkers. This might be related to the fact that the majority of these intellectuals belong to the generation of the Cultural Revolution and to the generation immediately after that, who were very much influenced by their elders. For them, social instability and "big democracy" (*da minzhu*) can plunge the country into anarchy. The legitimacy of the Party is thus fundamentally based on its capacity to rein in instability and introduce rule of law.

Their first-hand experience of the irrationality and the cynicism of the masses in moments of extreme violence and of sheer survival is often brandished as an argument justifying their elitist tendencies. Besides, the poor level of instruction and the passivity of the rural populations these scholars were made to live with during long months can partly explain the widespread argument that the Chinese population is too "backward" (*luohou*) and its quality too low (*suzhi di*) to be bestowed with the difficult task of electing its leaders at all levels of government. Studies of the 1989 students' movement have found connections between the mild support it received from intellectuals from that generation and their common suspicion of popular movements. Wang Juntao considers them as "negative realists. They have experienced moments of horror and despair and have witnessed political schemes and the chaos that enfolded in their wake, so that they regard human behaviour from a

simultaneously realistic and negative perspective – all the more so in a chaotic context.”¹³

The greatest fear of all seems to be the loss of control, the unleashing of uncontrolled masses. For liberals, the danger is that growing social inequalities and the impact of the resilience of the CCP on society, added to the revival of the far left which unfortunately cannot be properly censored as it frames its arguments in politically correct Marxist terms. We see here that the fear of social instability actually blurs the dividing lines between liberals, generally perceived as democrats and New Leftists who criticize democracy as elections. The liberals here worry about the irrationality of the masses as reflected in the Chinese web, while the New Left, who are said to have been spared because of their age or family background by the extreme experiences of the Cultural Revolution, believes masses to be a major force for change.

As a result of this all too brief article, I'd like to emphasize that we should be wary of the implicit equations that we make liberals=democrats; new leftists=Maoists, statist against democracy. We should consider their respective positions in the light of democracy as an essentially contested concept, in both Western and Chinese political theory, and put into question the idea that it is necessarily equated to competitive elections, which Western political science also refuse to simply equate to “democracy”. Besides, studying their representation of social instability and of the need to listen to what the common people have to say allows for a more sophisticated and more adequate understanding of their political views. It reveals the elitist propensity of so-called liberals (fear social instability, in favour of market reforms and competitive elections) and the populist tendency of New Left scholars (denouncing social inequalities, and the resulting social instability, promoting social egalitarian reform and participatory institutional innovations).

For Further Reading

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¹³ Wang Juntao, *Reverse course : Political Neo-Conservatism and regime stability in post-Tiananmen China*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2006, p. 171