

## **Political change and democracy in China**

### **An interview with Wang Shaoguang**

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**Can Western political concepts accurately describe the Chinese political regime? In this interview, Wang Shaoguang defines democracy as “a combination of responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability”. He claims that only when political reform is no longer solely equated with competitive elections can the true nature of political change in China come to light.**

Wang Shaoguang is a chair professor and chairperson in the Department of Government and Public Administration, a Changjiang<sup>1</sup> Professor in the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University in Beijing, a non-official member of the Commission on Strategic Development of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the chief editor of *The China Review*, an interdisciplinary journal on greater China.

He belongs to the first promotion of students to enter University after the Cultural Revolution in 1977. He first studied in the Law department at Beijing University. He later obtained his PhD in Political Science at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York) in 1990. He then taught politics at Yale University (New Haven, Connecticut) from 1990 to 2000 before settling in Hong Kong. His research interests include political economy, comparative politics, fiscal politics, democratization, and economic and political development in former socialist countries and East Asian countries. He is also known to be among the rare scholars, with the liberal Xu Youyu, to strive to publish studies on the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> The Changjiang scholarship program is part of the strategy adopted by the Chinese leadership to recruit talents from overseas and enhance the country's international competitiveness in higher education.

Wang belongs to an informal intellectual grouping labelled the New Left (*xin zuopai*). He is the author of many publications describing the different forms of inequalities growing as the Policy of Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*) launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 unfolded and advocating fiscal and social reforms to counterbalance them. He is a striking example of Chinese scholars who, though based in foreign universities, have tried hard to have an impact on the decision-making process in the Chinese mainland (he wrote several reports from Yale with the economist Hu Angang in the early 1990s: *The Chinese Economy in Crisis: State Capacity and Tax Reform* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001), *The Political Economy of Uneven Development: The Case of China* (M. E. Sharpe, 1999) and are willing to downplay their criticisms of the regime in order to serve as experts when they deem government policy finally tallies with their political convictions. Wang's most recent research thus documents the social policy launched by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

Wang is also currently working on the publication of a series of books on "State democratic re-building".

### **China's dramatic turns in policies since 1949**

**La Vie des Idées:** Professor Wang, could you describe the different turns in policies experienced by China since 1949?

**Prof. Wang:** I think China took quite a number of turns. The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, and for the first thirty some years, the government focused on economic development, but also on human security: every one had a secure life even though the living standards were low. I also think a main focus was egalitarianism. Some later argued that this kind of policy was done at the cost of economic growth, even though the economic growth rate in the first thirty years was still 6.5 %, which is pretty high compared to most countries in the same period of time. By the end of the first thirty years, China was still poor, with many people living in absolute poverty, perhaps 250 million people, perhaps even 300 million. They were equal, but equally poor. So for the next ten to fifteen years, starting in 1978-79, the main focus of the government was economic growth at all costs; therefore we could see economic growth rates in China go even higher, around 10 % a year, but in the meantime the government neglected the issue of growing inequality and growing insecurity for many people, especially in terms of health care. Only in the last several years, I would say perhaps

starting at the end of the 1990s, the government began to shift again, this time focusing more on human security and equality. So we see another turn in the last seven or eight years, all in all there were quite a few dramatic turns in the last six decades, especially in the last three.

**La Vie des Idées:** Would you agree to say that these turns had an impact on your research and that your research is very much related to this?

**Prof. Wang:** It's true. My first research is historical: it's about the Cultural Revolution, some of the most dramatic events I have personally experienced. And since then, for instance in the 1990s, because of the growing inequality, it was a time in which the mood in China and the rest of the world wasn't the same. People didn't seem to care so much about inequality; they cared about efficiency and economic growth. So when Hu Angang and I first talked about the growing inequality, for instance between rich provinces and poor provinces, many people in China said: "This is not a problem, this is a necessary cost for economic growth". So the intellectual mood at the time was very different from that of the last ten years. Back then, we had to fight very hard against people who were more senior than us, in important positions in research institutes, who said China had to sacrifice a certain degree of equality in order to achieve higher economic growth. So we had to write with strong theoretical and empirical arguments why it was wrong to pursue economic growth at the expense of equality. Fortunately I think more people began to see the potential dangers of growing inequality and growing human insecurity, and collectively the people at the bottom, and a changing international mood, coincided with the policy orientation at the very top. All those things contributed to bring about a change in the last eight to ten years.

### **Confronting different visions of democracy**

**La Vie des Idées:** A very active debate as to whether democracy is a universal value or not is currently taking place in China, and you have recently published a book called *Four Lectures on Democracy* (in Chinese, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008). Could you present your own vision of democracy?

**Prof. Wang:** My view on democracy has also changed quite substantially. Originally, I grew up during the Cultural Revolution so my understanding of democracy back then was popular participation; mass participation meant democracy. But there were some chaotic years during

the Cultural Revolution and I wasn't entirely satisfied with the situation, therefore my attention shifted to the West. I embraced the Western perception of democracy for quite a number of years. That's one of the reasons for which I chose to study in the United States, which for many Chinese intellectuals was seen as a model of democracy. So for a number of years I equated democracy with competitive elections – a very simple understanding. This is still a conventional understanding of democracy.

But then, I lived in the United States for almost twenty years and I became increasingly dissatisfied with this conception of democracy. I saw that elections could bring in and bring out politicians, but these politicians, once elected, were not necessarily responsive to the people's desires, demands and preferences. And that's not only the case in the United States. The United States, compared to many so-called electoral democracies, actually is not that bad. In other parts of the world, such as in the Asian Pacific area, a number of countries practice electoral democracy but the outcome is not quite as desired. So that's why I became increasingly critical of electoral democracy, or democracy based solely on competitive elections. And that's also why I began to read more about the intellectual history of democracy and realized that for thousands of years democracy was not associated with election, rather election was regarded as an aristocracy or oligarchy. Only the selection of leaders by lot, chance, and randomness was considered as democratic. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the people who were either critics or champions of democracy understood that democracy was supposed to function in that way, not in the way we understand democracy today. After some research it becomes clear that the conventional understanding of democracy was not to become widely accepted, or universally accepted, until perhaps the 1940s when Schumpeter published his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Only after that did it become universally accepted.

Also while reading I realized that many people, in established democracies, have become dissatisfied – there have been talks about the “democratic deficit” in the UK, in Canada, Australia, United States, and many parts of the world. And people have begun to invent a new way for ordinary people to participate in politics. And there are many new inventions, namely institutional inventions. That's why my understanding of democracy goes back to my original understanding that the participation of ordinary people is important. Not just the elite, not just the indirect selection of a certain leader: more people should be involved in the whole process

of decision-making, not only in choosing the decision-maker *per se*. So that's how my understanding of democracy evolved in the last thirty years.

**La Vie des Idées:** In your last book, and in a number of articles, you mentioned that democracy was a combination of responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability. Could you expand on this?

**Prof. Wang:** I think that in a conventional understanding of democracy, most people focus on accountability, in the sense that political leaders are elected by the people. If people are not happy they have to be voted out of office: that is supposed to be accountability. However we can see in many countries that political leaders are accountable, but not necessarily responsive to the people's preferences. I can take the case of health care reform in the United States. There have been talks of health care reform there for three decades. And there is no obvious change. Obama won the election, to some extent, based upon his promises to carry out a health care reform: but for three decades the government was not quite responsive. Everyone knows that the United States spends too much on health care but that the outcome is very poor compared to most OECD countries. So we can say that the American government is accountable, but they are not necessarily responsive. I was inspired by a friend of mine who also spent nearly thirty years in the United States teaching political science, and she mentioned that the three important concepts, responsiveness, accountability, and responsibility, are not necessarily the same thing. You can have different combinations of all three: you can have an accountable government that is not necessarily responsive, or a responsible government that is not necessarily accountable. So all kinds of combination are possible. I'm still thinking about these, I haven't yet developed some kind of theory at this point but I want to move in this direction.

### **How can the Chinese regime be defined?**

**La Vie des Idées:** Where does China stand right now? Can we still say that China is authoritarian? Is it a sufficient description? Or can we say that it is more democratic nowadays?

**Prof. Wang:** That's also why my recent interest is to develop a new typology of different political regimes. I'm not satisfied with the current understanding of democracy. I'm even

more dissatisfied with the current understanding of the term “authoritarianism”. We use this label on many regimes, on many countries which differ vastly. This kind of concept then becomes analytically useless: concepts are supposed to be helpful for us to understand the object, but when we use the same concept to label many different systems, this kind of concepts becomes useless. So when you say, “Is China authoritarian?”, I don’t know what that means. I mean, China was authoritarian a hundred years ago, eighty years ago, fifty years ago, thirty years ago, ten years ago, and still is nowadays. But China has changed a great deal; so this term is not quite useful. That’s why I’m still searching for a term to describe the current regime in China. There are many possibilities. One professor in the audience of a conference I gave at the College de France in February proposed a pluralist structure, but a pluralist structure is again very broad as a concept... there are many pluralist societies but they are not necessarily the same. So to search for a more precise concept to describe different types of regimes is my next research interest. I don’t have a good label or concept to describe China yet, but I hope I can do so five years from now.

**La Vie des Idées:** You said that China has changed a great deal. Can you expand a bit on this idea? How has the Chinese regime changed in the last few years?

**Prof. Wang:** In China and elsewhere people say that China has only had economic reforms and no political reforms in the last thirty years: they mean that China still doesn’t have competitive elections. Competitive elections become the sole criterion for political reform. But it seems to me that the concept of political reform should be more widely defined: any shift in the balance of power is a political reform or political change. I don’t like the term of “reform”, I much prefer the term of “change”. So if you think in terms of a shift in the balance of power and in the political structure, there has been substantial change in China in the last ten to thirty years. For instance there have been sea changes in the last thirty years in the balance of power between central government and local government, between government and the people, between different social classes. But the term of “political reform” cannot capture the subtleness of the change. I will say that there is a huge degree of decentralization of power. China in many ways is more decentralized than France or than federal systems like the United States or India. So it’s hard to say China is authoritarian and centralized, even though this is still the perception many people have of China from the outside. There is a kind of shortage of language, of term or concept. That’s why we often use these inclusive, very

sweeping concepts to describe different systems. It seems to me that it is detrimental to our understanding of reality rather than being helpful.

### **Further reading**

Online articles :

- « Changing Models of China's Policy Agenda Setting »  
<http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/1/56>
- « The Problem of State Weakness »  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/journal\\_of\\_democracy/v014/14.1wang.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/journal_of_democracy/v014/14.1wang.html)
- « The State, Market Economy and Transition »  
<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/3616611/The-State-Market-Economy-and-Transition-Shaoguang-Wang-Department-of>
- « The Great Transformation : the Double Movement in China »  
[http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/cgi/pdf\\_extract/35/2/15](http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/cgi/pdf_extract/35/2/15)

Wang Shaoguang's webpage: [www.cuhk.edu.hk/gpa/wang\\_files/BIO.htm](http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/gpa/wang_files/BIO.htm)

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