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Why China's Democratic Transition Will Differ from Taiwan's

Larry Diamond

This book has sought to compare the social, cultural, and political dynamics of democratic transition in Taiwan with the way those same variables are operating in China today. The ultimate question we have sought to answer is huge in scope and consequence: Will political change in China follow (more or less) the logic of Taiwan's transition? My answer to this question is: No.

There are, to be sure, some striking similarities between the two political systems. To begin with the obvious, both the societies share common language, culture, and history, and as Gilley notes, both political systems have their origins in the revolutionary politics of early-twentieth-century China. Both evolved and adapted under new forms of authoritarian rule after profound political traumas—for Taiwan, the retreat of the KMT to the island after its 1949 defeat by the Chinese Communist Party; for China, the mass bloodshed, political turmoil, and revolutionary upheaval of Mao Zedong's years. Following those periods of political turmoil, each system launched into a remarkable period of rapid economic growth that transformed society in Taiwan and is in the process of doing so in China. Rapid economic development had in Taiwan and is having in China many of the effects predicted by modernization theory: the growth of civil society and social and intellectual pluralism and the emergence of more liberal values, which place more of an emphasis on freedom and personal autonomy. These changes generated powerful internal pressures in Taiwan for democratic change, and they are beginning to do so in China, despite the continuing freeze on large-scale institutional reform ever since the demonstrations of 1989.

However, the differences between the two transitions of Taiwan historically and China in the future are more decisive than the similarities. To appreciate this, I suggest taking a different slice in time than the economic development trajectory (1951–1986 in Taiwan, 1977–2012 in China) that Bruce Gilley

examines in Chapter 1 of this book. If we wish to understand the effects of socioeconomic development on politics, we have to factor in a generational lag of about 20 years. This requires us to compare the quarter century of political change in Taiwan—from the beginning of the US tilt toward China in 1971 to the holding of Taiwan's first direct presidential election, in 1996, which completed the transition to democracy—with a similar period of change in China's history. Following the same logic of generational delay, I will date that period from the start of China's most recent double-digit growth boom, around 1997, to the as yet unknowable situation in 2022.

To appreciate what lessons Taiwan's experience may hold for China's future, we must compare not only the internal dynamics of these two systems in these two periods but also the world historical situations that each confronted and, in the case of China, will confront. Here, I argue, the comparison is of a relatively small and insecure society that needed to democratize to refashion its international legitimacy and maintain the support of its most vital ally, the United States, as compared with a rising global power that finds itself in tension (and potentially some day at war) with the United States. The two situations could not be more different, and as I will explain, these are far from the only differences in historical context and international environment surrounding the democratization of Taiwan, 1971–1996, and the political evolution of China during the early decades of the twenty-first century. These differences do not imply that China will not become a democracy. They do imply that China's transition to democracy will take longer, be driven by somewhat different logics, and be more fraught with internal and, potentially, international peril than was Taiwan's.

A Tale of Two Modernizations

The most striking parallel between Taiwan and China, graphically depicted in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 by Bruce Gilley, is the nearly identical profile of the growth trajectories in per capita income of the two systems, separated by a 26-year lag in time. As Gilley shows, China has so far replicated, virtually identically, the soaring ascent in per capita income achieved by Taiwan during more than a quarter century from 1951. During this period, Taiwan's per capita income increased more than eightfold, from roughly \$1,000 (in constant year 2000 price equivalent or purchasing power parity dollars) to nearly \$8,500 in 1986. By 1996, when the transition to democracy was completed, Taiwan's per capita income had nearly doubled again, to about \$16,000.¹ By 2004, Gilley shows, China's per capita income of \$5,333 was almost precisely that of Taiwan in 1978. If China maintains this pace (which was Taiwan's torrid pace in the miracle years of the 1970s and 1980s), then it will reach Taiwan's 1986 level of per capita income in the year 2012.

How does this look from a broader comparative perspective? If we examine per capita income, then we see that China has already entered what Samuel Huntington called the “zone of transition,” that is, the range of economic development levels in which transitions to democracy are more likely to take place.² According to the World Bank, China’s per capita gross domestic product (in constant year 2000 PPP dollars) had reached \$6,621 by 2006. That is slightly higher than the level (\$6,515) at which Brazil made a transition to democracy in 1985, and not much below the levels of Korea during its democratic transition year (1987, \$7,420) and of Chile when it voted to end the Pinochet dictatorship (1989, \$7,041). A recent World Bank revision based on new PPP calculations has reduced that level to \$4,091 in 2005 – in effect lopping about five years off of China’s growth trajectory. Moreover, Henry S. Rowen predicts—using conservative projections of future growth due to slower workforce growth and decreasing gains from “catch-up”—that China will reach a per capita income of about \$12,000 (in year 2000 dollars) by 2025. Projected against average international trends in the relationship between economic development and freedom, Rowen predicts that China will move into the “partly free” category of Freedom House by 2015 and will become a “free” country, in other words an unambiguous democracy, by 2025.³ If growth is faster, China’s democratization would happen sooner. Of course, as I will explain below, things could go badly wrong, and China’s economic growth could implode in a financial, environmental, or political crisis. Then, a different type of transition logic would take hold. But if the momentum of economic development is sustained, China will be within a generation about as rich as Taiwan was *when it completed its democratic evolution*.

It is vital to look beyond the aggregate income figures to consider the social impact of growth. One of the principal means by which economic development has fostered democratization—in Taiwan, Korea, Spain, Chile, and many other societies—is by raising levels of education and information, thereby creating a much more aware and empowered citizenry. In this respect, China—surprisingly for a “socialist” country—has lagged somewhat. In 2000, the country’s entire over-25 population had an average of only 5.74 years of schooling, less than the averages for all developing countries (4.89) and for the Asia-Pacific region (6.50).⁴ But the pace of educational expansion is fast. Rowen predicts the figure will increase to eight years by 2025.

There are other signs of the social empowerment that follows from rapid economic growth. By 2004, there were 258 cellular phone subscribers for every 1,000 people and an estimated 140 million Chinese Internet users (including some 34 million Chinese bloggers). Life expectancy had risen to 72 years, nearly the equal of countries with much higher human development levels. In the 25 years following Deng Xiaoping’s accession to power in 1978—when per capita income in China increased sevenfold and some 250 million people were lifted out of poverty—the circulation of newspapers tripled, and

the number of book titles published increased elevenfold. By 2006, there was more than one television set for every two households, compared to one in 330 in 1978.⁵ As a result of the dizzying pace of market reform and expansion over the past two decades, China's rulers now have to contend with a much larger, more resourceful, and better networked civil society than existed during the democratic uprising in 1989.⁶ "China is now awash with information that would have been considered seditious as recently as the early 1990s."⁷ The number of NGOs officially registered with the government had risen from 4,500 in 1988 to more than 300,000 in 2006, and some estimate the actual number is 10 times that.⁸

As Yun-han Chu shows in Chapter 2, there is early evidence that economic and social modernization is being accompanied, as it was in Taiwan and has been in so many other developing societies, by democratic value change. As China continues to become more educated and more urban, and as the younger generations socialized after the 1949 revolution and after the Cultural Revolution replace the older generations, democratic value orientations can be expected to increase markedly—precisely as modernization theory would predict, as Chu affirms, and has happened in Taiwan (as well as Korea). It is even possible that the pace of democratic value change in China could accelerate in the coming years as the country becomes more interconnected internally and more intensely wired to the rest of the world, via cell phones, the Internet, and travel.

The Dark Side of China's Development Path

All of this assumes, however, that China will continue, albeit possibly at a somewhat less torrid pace, its extraordinary economic development and that its benefits will be reasonably broadly distributed. There are many reasons to expect that China, with the world's largest market and financial reserves and with a new generation of more skillful policy technocrats at the helm of government and the economy, will do so. But there are also reasons to question this scenario of continuity and thus the assumption that Taiwan's relatively smooth rise to modernity will be replicated in China. Any social science projection of China's developmental future must at least consider the possibility that deepening contradictions in China's model of growth are not sustainable and that even the current much better educated, more pragmatic and skillful generation of Communist Party leaders cannot manage them much longer without democratizing changes in China's system of government. For some analysts of contemporary China, such as Pei, the party and the state lie at the core of the problem (to a much greater degree than was the case in Taiwan). Pei sees China's authoritarian regime not any longer as "developmental" but

as a “decentralized predatory state” in which “the individual interests of its agents”—to cash in on the boom while it lasts and to get rich as quickly as possible by any means—are slowly dismantling political stability. The result is unsustainable economic growth, “achieved at the expense of rising inequality, underinvestment in human capital, damage to the environment, and pervasive official corruption.”⁹

Many cities and counties have seen organized crime gain control of business with such collusion and protection from the authorities that they have become “local mafia states.”¹⁰ Local rulers prey on poor peasants, levying illegal taxes and fees and then selling off their land for lucrative developments.¹¹ A 2006 government report “claimed that over 60 percent of recent land acquisitions for construction were illegal.”¹² In September 2006, “the country’s top auditor warned that looting and misuse of government-held property were wrecking the value of many assets and constituted the biggest threat facing the nation.”¹³ There have been some high-profile crackdowns, but these have been selective—to neutralize rivals—and fail to address the vast scale of the crisis. Pei and other critics predict that the system will be unable to correct itself in more than superficial ways; sooner or later it will succumb to “the self-destructive dynamics found in nearly all autocracies: low political accountability, unresponsiveness, collusion and corruption.”¹⁴

Like previous Chinese dynasties, the Communist regime could lose its “mandate of heaven” as pathologies of bad governance reach critical mass. Crime, corruption, cronyism, bank fraud, local tyranny, national unresponsiveness, and a host of other ills threaten the stability of Communist Party rule more than may be captured by the chapters in this book. The dramatic rise in economic inequality, to levels that now “rival some of the most skewed countries in Latin America or Africa,” could increasingly undermine social stability and in particular the legitimacy of Communist rule, not only locally but at the center.¹⁵ The gap is widening fast between income strata and between the cities and the countryside. With development lagging and unemployment soaring in the rural areas, young men have moved to the cities and constitute a huge pool of rootless migrants, ready to be mobilized in protest. “At any given moment, there are over 120 million rural migrant workers roaming the streets of Chinese cities looking for jobs.”¹⁶

Sustained underinvestment in health and education, which makes the country vulnerable to pandemics such as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and avian flu or outbreaks such as SARS, has deprived the poor of even the limited access to health care they enjoyed under (real) Communism. Chronic disease is exploding, with reported cases of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) increasing by 30 percent in 2006 while hepatitis affects 10 percent of the population.¹⁷ A third of China’s land is severely eroded; a third of China’s 33,000 dams (including 100 large ones) are deemed

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defective; and three-quarters of its lakes and half its length of rivers have been polluted. The results are spreading deserts (to the edge of Beijing), crippling pollution, and devastating floods.¹⁸ Then there is the state of road and workplace safety: more than a hundred thousand road fatalities in 2002, a hundred thousand illnesses in a year from rat poison seeping into the human environment, a level of mining deaths thirteen times that of India.¹⁹ Any one of these ills, not to mention the complex interaction of them, could explode into crisis in the coming decade—or what Gilley in an earlier work called “metastatic crisis,” when dysfunction spreads beyond its initial boundaries to affect other functions and the country as a whole.²⁰

These statistics tell a different story of China’s modernization, one that cannot continue indefinitely to propel itself forward but suffers increasingly systemic drags on its sustainability that Taiwan did not have to contend with and that China lacks the institutional means or the will to correct. It is certainly conceivable that, in the coming decade, these pathologies will inhibit economic growth, intensify popular discontent, and further grind down the legitimacy and capacity of the state until a specific crisis metastasizes into something systemic. Pei does not anticipate the fall of Communism any time soon. Rather, the system could remain “trapped in prolonged economic and political stagnation” before it ultimately collapses “in the political equivalent of a bank run.”²¹ Another possibility is that economic growth could continue, but with widening inequality, corruption, and injustice, until “the radicalization of the poor” reaches truly explosive dimensions and political change comes through an upsurge of social protests or a crisis catalyzing a nationwide wave of protests more intense and possibly more violent than in 1989.²²

If Pei and other critics are right that political change in China is not going to be evolutionary (as in Taiwan), with more or less steady growth, but rather will be abrupt and disruptive, in the face of some large-scale social, economic, or environmental crisis, there are two directions in which this could lead. One, which Pei believes is just as likely as anything else, is a new form of authoritarianism, possibly a nationalist right-wing one, to hold the country together. The other, which Bruce Gilley envisions in his provocative book, *China’s Democratic Future*, is a transition to democracy.

If the scenario of social and political crisis does unfold, then which way China goes politically—to dictatorship or democracy or some hybrid regime—will not be determined solely by events and forces inside China. It will also depend on the regional and international environment in which China finds itself at the time. These are only some of the dimensions on which China’s situation today is quite different from that which Taiwan faced in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. I consider first other contrasting features of the two cases internally and then turn to the markedly different international and historical contexts.

How China Today Differs from Taiwan Historically

China today differs dramatically from the historical example of Taiwan in some obvious ways. Perhaps the most obvious is scale: China's population today is more than 60 times that of Taiwan's during its transition. Almost all of its provinces are much larger than Taiwan's. Indeed, about nine of China's provinces have three times the population of Taiwan, equaling or exceeding the roughly 60 million population of sizable European countries such as Britain, France, and Italy. Sichuan Province has a population of more than 80 million people, Henan and Shandong Provinces more than 90 million. Even most smaller Chinese provinces, such as Fujian, just across the Strait from Taiwan, are larger (in the case of Fujian, about 50 percent larger) than Taiwan in population. Physically as well, China dwarfs Taiwan, with a land mass more than 250 times the size of Taiwan. Indeed, about the time Taiwan completed its transition, when it still commonly referred to itself as the Republic of China and made reference to its being a part of (and the legitimate government of) China as a whole, the official yearbook of the Republic of China acknowledged that "Taiwan is the smallest province of the Republic of China."²³

Scale matters politically. During several decades of limited political competition, and especially during the ten-year process of transition from 1986 to 1996, Taiwan's ruling party was able to penetrate the local level more effectively and maintain more confident command of the process because of Taiwan's relatively small size geographically and demographically. Of course, the Chinese Communist regime represents one of the world's biggest historical experiments in centralized administrative control and ideological and political penetration of a very large territory, as Tun-jen Cheng and Gang Lin note in Chapter 8 on competitive elections. But even though the Beijing leadership still exercises effective authority over China's vast continental territory, it is not the kind of monolithic and ideological control of Mao's era. Increasingly, there are vast differences among the provinces (particular between the coastal provinces and the interior) in income levels and political outlook, and the implementation of central governmental initiatives, such as village elections, varies widely not only across provinces but also within them. Although China is much more ethnically homogeneous than was the former Soviet Union, China's political leaders worry about losing control. With so many provinces having populations larger than most nations (other than China, there are only 21 countries in the world with populations of more than 60 million), many of China's provinces have the ability to wrest governing autonomy from the center.²⁴ And it is much more difficult for the central authorities in Beijing to know reliably what is really going on at so many local levels. The authorities in Taiwan never had to confront anything like this as they loosened central government control, phased-in competitive local elections, and tolerated the rise of an opposition party.

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A second enormous difference has to do with the timing and pace of introducing competitive elections. As Tun-jen Cheng and Gang Lin explain in Chapter 8, this happened very early on in the establishment of the KMT regime on Taiwan, virtually from the beginning of its retreat to Taiwan after its defeat in China in 1949. In this case, the ethnic and political cleavage between the China émigrés and the local Taiwanese created an imperative for legitimization of KMT rule and incorporation of local leaders, which the KMT leadership—unable to afford a second political calamity—recognized. Moreover, these elections conferred some real power to govern and manage developmental resources, at the township and county levels after 1950, and at the level of Taiwan's provincial assembly after 1951. Nothing like this has happened in China; there, the only level of political authority where electoral competition has been introduced systematically (and even there, unevenly) has been villages, a tiny microlevel that is largely powerless.

This difference has enormous political consequences for the likely transition trajectories of the two systems. Taiwan was able to, and indeed driven to, negotiate a gradual “soft landing” to real democracy, in part because of the intricate web of pressures and reassurances generated by several decades of local elections. Although the members of China's new generation of party elites are also less ideological and better managers, they owe their positions to the party, not the people, and thus lack the incentive to press for a continuous expansion of the scope of electoral competition that prevailed in Taiwan. This is a major reason why competitive elections in China remain stuck at the largely inconsequential level of the village and why the prospect of real electoral competition at the township or county level—not to mention the provincial one—remains a distant dream. Coming back to the problem of scale, it is also hard to imagine how a province of 40 to 90 million people could organize, as Taiwan province did for decades, competitive elections without competing parties to organize the competition. The impetus to form at least underground opposition parties to structure the choice and signal the voters would become more compelling as well as more threatening to the Chinese Communist Party.

There was also a strong element of reassurance or political confidence-building in the repeated practice of competitive elections over several decades in Taiwan. The KMT developed a strong political machine and a confidence that they could continue to win elections, even with the legalization of opposition parties and the democratization of the key levers of central government power between 1986 and 1996. As the opposition committed to playing by these rules, each side experienced what Dankwart Rustow calls “habituation,” in which the norms, procedures, and expectations of democracy (or in this case, initially, an increasingly competitive authoritarian system) gradually become internalized among contending political actors, so that these politicians place their faith in and learn to conform instinctively to the rules of the game.²⁵ Part of this process involves the growth of trust among competing

political actors, as each side gains confidence that the victory of the other will not mean its elimination or victimization, and thus what Robert Dahl calls a "system of mutual security" takes hold between government and opposition.²⁶ Although the process was far from perfect or smooth, something like these changes in political norms and expectations was able to unfold over several decades in Taiwan, beginning at a very early point in its economic development. By contrast, as China races out of poverty toward Taiwan's mid-1980s development level, nothing like this process of political contestation and confidence building between ruling party cadres and at least loosely organized opposition forces *has even begun*.

Of course, one should not dismiss altogether the significance of China's experiment over the last two decades with competitive village elections, which, as Chang and Lin observe, have gone reasonably far toward institutionalization and have seen the defeat of a fairly high percentage of incumbents (e.g., over 40 percent) in at least some provinces. There is even a certain parallel with Taiwan, in which the model and momentum of competitive village elections have encouraged a "trickling up" to the township level, for election of the township head and in some cases the township party committee and secretary. But this has been trickling up at a snail's pace, still limited and experimental. The village committee remains a largely powerless, policy-implementation body, under the thumb of the township authorities, and even the township is well below the level (relative to authority at the center) at which Taiwan had permitted electoral competition decades before its transition. Moreover, a crucial missing element, as Cheng and Lin stress in Chapter 8, is the promise of eventual multiparty democracy, which bound the KMT to a democratic reform agenda at some point but which the CCP has so far steadfastly eschewed. In this respect, as Gilley notes in Chapter 10, the ideological and institutional difference between the two settings—the authoritarian pluralist regime in Taiwan under the KMT versus the (still) Communist regime in China—should not be minimized.

Finally, it is worth noting another striking difference between the two internal settings of Taiwan historically and China today. During the 1970s and 1980s, Taiwan was reaching the stage of an industrialized country with a relatively egalitarian growth pattern (like other East Asian Tigers, such as Singapore and Korea). It is true that during the 1980s income inequality widened in Taiwan, from a Gini coefficient of .277 in 1980 to .303 in 1988, with a majority of Taiwanese listing the gap between rich and poor as a serious social problem.²⁷ But in China today, inequality is already considerably worse, with the Gini coefficient estimated at somewhere between 0.45 and 0.50, and possibly even higher.²⁸ Moreover, this more extreme level of inequality than Taiwan ever experienced comes in a Communist country that has trumpeted an ideology of equality, and the party as the defender of mass popular interests, for six decades. It also comes in a context of more visible

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and extreme corruption and misrule than was evident in Taiwan during its transition. Thus, the longer the Chinese Communist Party waits to open up political power to electoral competition at higher levels, the more it risks an unraveling of its authority, since its cadres have less experience at competing in elections and more burdens of social and economic problems than did the KMT cadres in Taiwan.

The International Contexts

As Jacques deLisle notes in Chapter 9, the international context of the early Cold War and the Communist threat across the Strait was hardly conducive to democratization in Taiwan. But beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s through the completion of the transition in 1996, that context changed dramatically. Taiwan's top leaders—first Chiang Ching-kuo and then Lee Teng-hui—came to recognize that democratization was vital to Taiwan's quest for continued geopolitical and military support from the United States, and thus literally to its survival. It is important to recall that when Chiang Ching-kuo made the decision to initiate the political transition in 1986 and then tolerated the formation of an opposition party, East Asia was seized with democratic ferment. In February 1986, the Philippine “people power” revolution toppled the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos through peaceful mobilization, after a stolen election. The 1980s had been a time of rising student, worker, and other civil society mobilization against military rule in South Korea, and in 1987 (when martial law was formally lifted in Taiwan) the Korean military dictator, Chun Doo Hwan, was forced to yield to massive public pressure and allow a direct popular election for his presidential successor. In both cases, timely pressure from the United States had helped to foster a peaceful transition to democracy, and both the Reagan administration and the US Congress were becoming increasingly active in pushing to advance human rights and democracy abroad. Not long after Chiang Ching-kuo died in 1988, Thailand crossed the murky line from a military-dominated semidemocracy to an electoral democracy when Chatichai Choonhavan became the first elected member of parliament to become prime minister since the breakdown of the country's previous democratic experiment, in 1976. Also in 1988, the Pakistani military dictator, General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq died (or, some believe, was assassinated) in a plane crash, and there quickly followed a transition to electoral democracy that brought the democracy advocate and opposition party leader, Benazir Bhutto, to power as prime minister.

During the 1980s, most Latin American countries were also making or had already made transitions to democracy. Between the beginning of the Third Wave of democratization in 1974 and 1988, the number of democracies in the world increased by more than 50 percent, from 40 to 67, and the propor-

tion of democracies in the world rose from 27 to 40 percent. Then in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe—and nearly so in China itself—and a second burst of the Third Wave erupted. Between 1989 (as Taiwan's transition was moving ahead) and 1996 (when Taiwan's transition to democracy was completed), the number of democracies worldwide exploded, from 67 to 118, and the proportion of democracies among the world's states increased from about two-fifths to three-fifths.²⁹

In other words, Taiwan made its transition to democracy during a unique moment in world history, probably the most rapid expansion in the number and proportion of democracies we will ever see. China, by contrast, is unlikely to benefit from such a democratic global zeitgeist. By 1996, the expansion of democracy in the world had leveled off. Although more countries in the world have since become democratic and overall levels of freedom have risen, the proportion of democracies in the world has essentially remained static in the last decade (oscillating around 60 to 62 percent of all states). Moreover, a new burst of democratic breakthroughs in the near future will be more difficult and unlikely, for several reasons. First, most of the most fertile countries for democratization from a developmental standpoint have already made transitions. Second, the majority of the remaining authoritarian regimes are hard cases, because of very low levels of development or unfavorable regional contexts (especially in the Middle East). Third, the difficulties surrounding the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the increased self-confidence and resolve of authoritarian states such as Russia, China, Iran, Egypt, Kazakhstan, and Venezuela (many of which are major oil exporters at a time when the price of oil globally is hitting \$100 a barrel), have generated an authoritarian backlash against democratic mobilization and democracy promotion that makes it more difficult for civil societies and political oppositions to adopt the techniques that led to democratic breakthroughs in the 1990s and early 2000s (in the so-called color revolutions). Cooperation among authoritarian states (for example in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that draws together Russia, China, and many Central Asian dictatorships) further diminishes the prospects. Add to this the new cold war that has emerged in the form of a US-led "global war on terror" and the difficulties of many of the new democracies in controlling corruption, achieving broad economic development, improving political institutions, and therefore consolidating democracy, and there emerges a much less favorable global context for democracy in the world.

Indeed, China may have more of an effect on global democratic trends than vice versa. Certainly no development in Asia would more powerfully tip the odds in favor of democratization in authoritarian countries as disparate as Burma, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia than a breakthrough to electoral democracy in China. In contrast to Taiwan, then, China will be much more of a shaper than a receiver of regional and global political pressures and demonstration effects.

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There is one ironic twist to this generalization, which deLisle notes in Chapter 9. One of the few regional or global actors with the potential to affect significantly whether and how China moves to democracy is Taiwan itself. Should the island continue to be gripped by political deadlock, enmity, and rising nationalist pressure for Taiwan independence, this would likely dampen Chinese enthusiasm for democracy at the level of societal norms and aspirations as well as elite political intentions. Worse still, political polarization and continuing moves by a new government in Taiwan to legally separate from China and further press the boundaries of Taiwan's separate identity could feed an intense nationalist reaction in China, and in a context of political crisis, provide grounds for reactionary forces to mobilize popular sentiment and tilt a future moment of possible democratic transition toward a right-wing military or nationalist dictatorship. By contrast, should Taiwan's politics stabilize and its leaders reach out to Beijing, then the political balance in China could well be tilted toward a more positive view of democracy. In fact, it is possible to argue that no external event would redound more favorably for democratization in China than a political accommodation between the Beijing and Taipei.

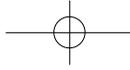
There is one potential additional parallel, however, between Taiwan and China, and it is an extension of the one shared causal driver in their democratizations: economic development. One aspect of economic development that helped to generate pressure for democratic change in Taiwan, by accelerating normative change and the growth of civil society, was the large number of social scientists, businesspeople, economists, technocrats, lawyers, and ultimately politicians who were trained in the United States. This training abroad, particularly in law and the social sciences, heavily disposed them to "Western democratic ideals."³⁰ More generally, as deLisle notes in Chapter 9, the density of social and economic ties between Taiwan and the West, especially Taiwan and the United States, gradually helped to shape the view in Taiwan that Taiwan could not become a fully modern country and a member of the club of advanced industrial countries without becoming a democracy.

Will Chinese political and social elites begin to think in a similar way as their country becomes increasingly rich, educated, and powerful? There is no guarantee; Singapore continues to defy the odds (though I do not believe it will do so indefinitely), and the one element that was missing from the path of Taiwan and Korea was the geopolitical weight for either system to become a global model in its own right. Increasingly, China will have that power. But it will also have, even if it is alongside booming growth, a vexing tangle of social, environmental, and governance problems that cannot be addressed unless the country allows much more individual and media freedom, social and political pluralism, and transparency and judicial independence as well as more competition for power than it has so far done. In other words, as development creates a more and more educated and resourceful society, but with

deeper and deeper contradictions, China's leaders will have to accommodate democratic evolution in order to keep the system stable. The natural instinct will be to institute more economic and social freedom, judicial professionalism, and effective, accountable governance, but in the absence of real political competition: in other words, Singapore. But much as they might wish to make a soft landing to the Singaporean system as a long-term (if not permanent) way of governing, China is too large and diverse, its political rulers are too corrupt, and its problems are too deep for those very limited reforms to suffice. For one thing, as China moves in that direction, toward what the Chinese political scientist Pan Wei has termed (and advocated) as a "consultative rule of law regime," people will not rest content with the limited political freedom and space granted to them.³¹ They will demand more freedom and more pluralism—partly because their political values and aspirations will have changed so much and partly because they will see that the only way to contain corruption in China at this point is to enable the people to replace their leaders in free, fair, and competitive elections.

In China, there will be no natural resting place, no enduring equilibrium for this process of governance reform short of democracy itself. This is why the Chinese Communist leaders sit on the horns of a dilemma. If they do not open up the political system and move toward democracy, they risk popular discontent exploding at some point as a more politically restless, resourceful, and assertive populace demands more freedom and more accountable governance while governance problems mount. If they do gradually introduce political competition at successively higher levels of authority while also expanding the scope for dissent and criticism, then they risk seeing the Chinese Communist Party's grip on power erode and eventually slip away—and possibly faster than happened in Taiwan. For as Bruce Gilley has written elsewhere, "the CCP [of the current era] is not the KMT [of Taiwan's democratizing era]. The power of the CCP ... has weakened considerably in the post-Mao era. While it remains a dominant force when compared to society as a whole, it is probably not dominant enough to successfully carry out a phased political transition."³²

At some point, then, China's rulers may be forced to pick their poison. They may be confronted with three options. One would be to begin democratization and try to negotiate guarantees of their political and financial interests before it is too late, while knowing that this process of opening could well bring their downfall from power. The second would be to sit tight and hope for the best (namely that they can kick the political problems down the road to the next generation of leaders), while knowing that "regimes that waited too long saw their rulers dragged from their offices and shot in the head."³³ The third would be to divert attention by using or manufacturing a crisis with the West, perhaps over Taiwan, to recover some temporary legitimacy for the regime and mobilize people behind it with nationalist fervor.

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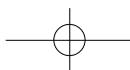
The third option is of course the most dangerous—for Taiwan, for the United States, for the world, and, not least, for China. Whether that becomes a serious option will depend in large measure on the environment China faces regionally and internationally—whether Taiwan seeks accommodation or independence; whether the world can avoid a global recession and cooperate to address the mounting shortages of energy, water, and other resources; and whether the United States can draw China into a new era of global partnership, as what Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick termed in 2005 “a stakeholder that shares responsibility.”³⁴ Doing so means that the United States must walk a fine line between respect for China’s dignity and sovereignty as a rising great power and resistance to its efforts to defend or entrench authoritarian regimes in Asia and around the world. It means standing up rhetorically for principles of human rights and the rule of law in China and working patiently in private with Chinese leaders to keep human rights on the agenda, while recognizing that US leverage over China is extremely limited. Probably the most important thing that the United States can do is to create a benign environment for the tremendous developmental changes that China is undergoing to work their own autonomous effects in generating democratic change.

China today is dramatically different from Taiwan, then and now. Its path and pace of regime transformation will not follow Taiwan’s. But many of the political and normative consequences of economic development will be the same. If new generations of Chinese political leaders, technocrats, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and artists can be vigorously and yet respectfully engaged, the political outcome will, sooner or later, likely be the same as in Taiwan: some form of genuine democracy.

Notes

1. All of the figures are drawn, as noted in Figure 1.1, from Alan Heston, Robert Summers, and Bettina Aten, “Penn World Table Version 6.2,” Center for International Comparisons of Production, Income, and Prices at the University of Pennsylvania, September 2006. Available at http://pwt.econ.upenn.edu/php_site/pwt_index.php.

2. Huntington 1991, 62, table 2.1, calculated the most likely zone of transition as those countries with a 1976 per capita gross national product (GNP) of \$1,000 to \$3,000—which would be roughly \$2,500 to \$7,400 in nominal year-2000 dollars. Between 1974 and 1990, 16 of the 21 nondemocratic countries in that income group democratized or liberalized politically, and five other states in that group were already democracies. It is difficult to transform that category from nominal into international prices because the latter figures must be computed for every country individually. The gap between China’s nominal GDP per capita in 2004, \$1,323, and the same figure in PPP dollars, \$5,493, is much greater (about four to one) than the disparity for Brazil (\$3,337 vs. \$6,515) or Korea (\$5,291 vs. \$7,420) during their transition years (1985 and 1987 respectively). So although China in its nominal dollar per capita income is not yet in the prime of Huntington’s zone of transition, when the figure is computed



more realistically in international prices, it is roughly equivalent to Brazil's per capita income and so has clearly entered the "zone of transition."

3. Rowen 2007, 28–29.
4. Ibid., 41.
5. Pei 2006, 2.
6. Gilley 2004a, 60–94.
7. Gilley 2004a, 73.
8. Ma 2007, 6.
9. Pei 2006, 209.
10. Ibid., 161–165. As in the United States and Europe, favored sectors for the mafia include real estate, transportation, and construction.
11. Ibid., 189, 191–196.
12. The figure rose to 90 percent in some cities. Saich 2007, 38.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Pei 2006, 208.
15. Gilley 2004a, 38.
16. Ma 2007, 5.
17. Harding 2007.
18. Pei 2006, 175–176. The data on dams are from Gilley 2004a, 103. In 1975, he reports, twin dams burst in Henan Province, killing an estimated 300,000 people. No catastrophe on anything approaching such a scale could be covered up today in China, even with the level of state control of the Internet and other media.
19. Pei 2006, 170.
20. Gilley 2004a, 103.
21. Pei 2006, 210–212.
22. Chen An 2003.
23. That is no longer true since Hainan Island became a province in April 1988, but the Taiwan government at the time did not recognize that move. Republic of China 1997, 3.
24. If China broke apart into separate countries based on its provinces, nine of its provinces would be among the 30 most populous countries in the world.
25. Rustow 1970.
26. Dahl 1971, 16.
27. Chu Hai-yan 1994, 91–92. The Gini coefficient varies from 0 to 1, with 0 being most equal (indicating everyone having the same income) to 1 being most unequal (indicating control of all income by one individual).
28. Saich 2007, 40. But Gilley 2004a, 38, cites some sources indicating that it may be as high as 0.60, making it one of the most unequal in the world. Saich cites official sources as reporting the urban-rural income gap at 3.22 to 1 in 2005.
29. Diamond 2008, chap.2 and Appendix Table 1.
30. Cheng 1989, 483.
31. For Pan Wei's influential essay and responses to it, including mine, see Zhao 2006.
32. Gilley 2004a, 100.
33. Gilley 2004a, 99.
34. Robert Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005. Available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive/2005/Sep/22-290478.html>.

