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Western Transitology and Chinese Reality: Some Preliminary Thoughts

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Western Transitology and Chinese Reality: Some Preliminary Thoughts

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It is the object of considerable debate in Western scholarship whether an authoritarian political order dominated by a strong communist party can continue to exist in China given the many challenges stemming from internal reform and the impact of globalization. Will China eventually turn democratic and will the communist party become obsolete and disappear, just as has happened in many other former communist countries. There seems to be a general consensus that Chinese political system is bound to change, but there is no agreement as to the direction and form of change.

The various views on China's political future can be divided into three schools: "Evolution to Democracy" School; "Fragile/Collapse" School, and the "Resilient Authoritarianism" School.

Scholars belonging to the "Evolution to Democracy" School argue that China sooner or later will evolve into a democracy. [1] They disagree among each other on the pace of the process, but are in agreement on the end result. Although they disagree on the pace of the transition to democracy, they are unanimous in viewing the process as an evolution, rather than a violent rupture or break. The result will be the disappearance of the CPC and the emergence of a political system with free elections. This school operates within the so-called transition paradigm which posits that once a country moves away from dictatorial rule there is a linear process towards pluralism and democracy.

According to Carothers five core assumptions define the transition paradigm. The first is that any country moving away from dictatorial rule is a country in transition towards democracy.[2] The second assumption is that the transition towards democracy (democratization) unfolds in a sequence of stages. First there is the "opening", a period in which cracks appear in the ruling dictatorial regime, with the most prominent crack being a cleavage between hardliners and softliners. Second there follows a "breakthrough" with the collapse of the regime and the emergence of a new democratic system and the establishment of new democratic institutional structures (e.g. a new constitution). Third comes "consolidation", a slow process of transforming democratic forms into democratic substance through elections, the reform of state institutions and the strengthening of civil society. The introduction of elections is crucial, as they will bring about a broadening and deepening of political participation.

The fourth assumption is that basic and underlying conditions in the transitional countries – i.e. political traditions, institutional legacies, ethnic make-up, religious beliefs, and cultural background – will not be major factors in determining the outcome of the transition process. The fifth assumption is that democratic transitions are being built on coherent and functioning states.[3]

Carothers maintains that most transitional countries do not conform to these assumptions.[4] They instead enter a gray zone where they are neither clearly dictatorial nor clearly headed towards democracy. They get stuck in the transition process, so to speak. Two broad political syndromes seem to be common in the gray zone. The first is "feckless pluralism", where political participation extends little beyond voting and democracy remains shallow and shaky. The other is "dominant-power politics". In dominant-power countries there is a blurring of the line between the state and the ruling party and the state's assets (jobs, public funding, information, coercive power, etc.) are at the service of the ruling party.[5] Carother also argues that the assumption that democratic transitions are built on coherent states overlooks that often state-building is an integral part of the transition process.

On the surface China fits the transition paradigm. There are cracks in the system and it is not difficult to discern hardliners and softliners in the political discourse as it unfolds in the state media and among intellectuals; direct elections for the position as village head have been instituted at the local level in the countryside; state institutions have been reformed; civil society has expanded; etc. However, the process of political reform has not been linear, rather it has formed a zigzag pattern or a pattern of two step forward and one step back. Moreover, China is clearly a country where a dominant party controls the state and its main assets. In sum, the Chinese experience actually challenges the transition paradigm in the sense that China seems to be fixed in a zone of dominant-power politics rather than in a continuous and linear process of democratisation. The transitology theory does not fit Chinese reality.

The Fragile/Collapse School

Adherents of the "Collapse" School maintain that the current political system in China is bound to collapse.[6] They argue that the Party has lost its legitimacy and will be swept away. Some scholars in this group are worried that the collapse will be violent and chaotic due to built up tensions and grievances. Related to this school is a "Fragile" School, which maintains that the Chinese political system is brittle and fragile and therefore easily can experience a break-down.[7]

Minxin Pei is an interesting example of the "collapse" school.[8] He argues that China is stuck in the middle. In his mind that there is no transition to speak of, as China is trapped in a system which he alternatively labels a development autocracy, a decentralized predatory state or a cleptocracy. This is a system where the agents of the state are engaged in rent-seeking, corruption and collusion to benefit themselves, their families and their friends. Collusive networks of corrupt officials, often working together with organized criminal groups, are emerging in many parts of China. They form local mafia states that undermine the central state power and will ultimately cause the regime to collapse.

Minxin Pei highlights what he calls the erosion of state capacity in China by discussing the Chinese government's performance in several critical areas: taxation, health and education, enforcement of laws and rules, etc. In all these areas he sees a decline of state capacity. He also argues that the CCP is suffering a decline. He sees this evidenced in the shrinkage of the Party's organizational penetration, in the erosion of its authority and in the breakdown of its internal discipline.

In short Minxin Pei argues that this system will eventually collapse as it has no legitimacy. It will not be able to sustain the pressure from globalization and internal change. But unlike the adherents of the "evolution to democracy" school he is not clear on what will follow the breakdown of the system. Minxin Pei's interpretation of "China's trapped transition" also does not seem to fit Chinese reality. The system has not broken down and in fact seems stronger and more consolidated than at any time since 1989.

The "Resilient Authoritarianism" School

The "Resilient Authoritarianism" School contends that the Chinese political system is stable and that the Party is not going to go away in the near future.[9] On the contrary, as a consequence of renewal and revitalization, the Party appears to have consolidated its grip over Chinese society. The Party organization has proved to be adaptable to new circumstances created by economic reform and the emergence of new social groups.

The concept of "resilient authoritarianism" was originally put forward by Andrew Nathan, who has no sympathy for the Chinese political system, but has realized its resilience. In recent years the "resilient authoritarianism" school has gained traction. In 2004 Zheng Yongnian and the present author published a book focussing on the CCP and its organizational renewal. Scholars such as David Shambaugh and Bruce Dickson who previously would argue that the CCP was losing its capacity and legitimacy to rule and was experiencing steady decay are now also emphasizing the resilience of the system.

The Chinese political system is dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. A change in the system would entail fundamental changes of the role of the CCP and vice versa. Such change was predicted in the early 1989-1990 in the wake of the Tian Anmen Massacre, when many scholars predicted that Chinese Communist Party would disintegrate as it has lost its legitimacy. This scenario was further reinforced with the implosion of the Soviet state and the Soviet Communist Party's loss of power. Impressed by these events, Western China scholarship began to focus on civil society, private sector development, central-local tensions, migrants, and other marginalized groups – in short on the centrifugal forces in Chinese society rather than on the forces that hold the system together and make it work.

However, the system did not break down and the CCP did not disappear. In fact, by the early 2000s it became clear that the Party had in fact undergone a process of renewal and revitalization. As a result of this process the Party and its governing apparatus were much younger, better qualified and technically more competent than during the Mao era. A few statistics suffice to prove this point. [10]

In 1979 only 29 percent of Chinese cadres were below 35 years of age. This percentage has now risen to more than 50 percent. The share of cadres between 36 and 54 years of age has fallen from 65 percent in 1979 to 45 percent today.

The educational level of cadres has improved dramatically since the beginning of the reform period in 1979. The share of cadres with junior middle school education and below was almost 50 percent in 1979, now this share of less educated cadres has gone down to less than 8 percent. Among leading cadres, the share of people with a university degree has increased from 16 percent in 1979 to more than 80 percent. Now more than 95 percent of the Central Committee holds a college degree and an increasing number of top leaders even hold a PhD.

The change to a younger and better educated cadre corps is associated with rigorous training courses for Chinese officials. Now the rule is that Chinese officials must have at least 3 months of training within a five year period. For many officials training and educational courses at Party schools or training centres in China and abroad is a precondition for advancing in the system.

New guidelines and regulations have been adopted with stipulations concerning open appointment and selection of cadres and filling of official positions and examination. These include a public notification system for filling positions below *ting*-level and experiments with multi-candidate elections for leading government and party posts; regular job rotation from section level and above; strengthening the supervision of cadres by introducing clear measures for performance evaluations combined with public feedback on the quality of work done. There are also flexible remuneration and pecuniary rewards to high performers.

Chinese politics have been much more institutionalized. For example a rule has been introduced concerning age limits for membership of top Party organs such as the politbureau and politbureau standing committee. Thus politbureau members who are 70 years of age or close to 70 cannot be re-elected to these important Party organs. A tenure system has been introduced, so that a Chinese official only can work two terms (2 x 5 years) in the same position. This also applies to top positions such as prime minister or president. Moreover, competitive elements have been introduced into the system. This is not only the case at the grass roots level where village leaders now are elected in open elections with multiple candidates competing. It is also the case at the top of the system, where polls are taken to estimate the support of candidates for leadership positions. For example was Xi Jinping's elevation to the position as heir apparent the result of a straw poll among 300 Chinese top leaders. In the poll Xi Jinping received more support than Li Keqiang, who was widely regarded as Hu Jintao's favourite. In general, unlike in Libya or North Korea, Chinese leaders do not have a monopoly on power and they cannot directly pass on the rein of power to loyal followers, let alone to their own sons and daughters. There is a growing body of regulations

detailing leadership selection and appointment and what kind of qualifications Chinese officials and leaders must possess. All this has contributed to the consolidation of the Chinese political system and made it even more resilient.

Democracy versus Authoritarianism

The current political system in China is characterized by the absence of democratic institutions in the form of competing parties and open elections. Elections are not viewed as a viable route to power. Major opposition is not allowed and there are in fact no channels for coordinated articulation of opposition. The system is also characterized by a low level of uncertainty.

Such a system can be defined as authoritarianism. However the following elements have been introduced which have created a system of softened authoritarianism. For example, elections have been introduced at the local level. Moreover, there is an increasing debate and pluralism within the Party. As mentioned leadership positions are increasingly being filled based on open announcement and democratic consultation. In general a process of professionalization and normativization has created a more transparent and predictable political system. But is it democratic or a resultat of a democratic process?

There are many definitions of democracy. In this context I define democracy as a system that posseses the following characteristics: (i) free elections; (ii) broad protection of civil liberties; (iii) level playing field. A system that violates at least one of these three defining attributes cannot be labelled a democratic system. For example a system that has free elections and protects civil liberties is still authoritarian if the playing field is heavily skewed in favour of the incumbents. There is competition in such a system, but competition is unfair. So what we have is a hybrid system of competitive authoritarianism.[11]

Is competitive authoritarianism a transition to democracy or a system that is stuck in the middle? In a Singaporean context it would be considered an end result and in fact a superior model, whereas an anglo-saxon discourse would regard it as a transitional phase towards democracy. The Chinese

experimentation with free elections is in fact within the framework of competitive authoritarianism. For example are village elections heavily skewed in favour of the incumbent, namely local cadres and party officials.

The notion of "fragmented authoritarianism" also denotes that the Chinese polity is not a monolithic entity ruled by an all-powerful Party. [12] It is in fact a fragmented system consisting of various subsystems which compete for influence and budget allocations. Within the economic arena, a corporatization process has taken place resulting in the emergence of large business groups that operate according to market conditions. Thus they represent forces and interests that have a fragmented impact on the centralized power system. Central-local relations and various territorial, and often conflicting, levels of authority contribute further to a fragmented polity. In sum, there is considerable competition among various social and economic interestst and groups stimulating the emergence of competitive authoritarianism.

Good government

Western political discourse often equates good government with democracy. However, Chinese sustained economic development and growth over more than three decades seem to refute this equation. China seems to prove that often authoritarian systems can distribute quickly and more efficiently than democratic system. Democracies focus on processes (elections) whereas they often forget outcomes. In a developing country struggling to come out of poverty outcomes (economic growth) often will appear to be more important than processes. As Frances Fukuyama has indicated in his recent book, the key question is accountability or the quality of government.[13] Transitologists neglect this discussion because they assume that once democracy has been achieved, legitimacy and accountability have automatically been achieved.

Concluding Remarks

Developments in China over the last 30 years challenge the so-called transition paradigm. This paradigm posits that once a country moves away from dictatorial rule there is a linear process towards democracy and pluralism

(Brødsgaard and Zheng 2004). The transition paradigm also assumes that authoritarian regimes are fragile due to weak legitimacy, too much focus on political oppression, over-centralization of the political decision-making process, and the dominance of personal power (patrimonialism) over institutional norms.

On the surface, China fits the transition paradigm. There have been cracks in the system over the 30 year reform period and it is not difficult to discern between hardliners and softliners in the political discourse as it has unfolded among intellectuals, the state media and occasionally even among the top leaders. Importantly, direct elections for village heads have been instituted in the country side. Also there has been a process, where the economy and social and cultural norms increasingly have been modernized/ Westernized and traditional norms and values have been on the defensive.

China has experienced significant change during the last 30 years. However, the reform process has not been linear; rather it has formed a zigzag pattern of two steps forward and one step back. The Chinese political regime should not be regarded as an incomplete or transitional form of democracy. It is a hybrid regime and as comparative political studies show such a regime can stay hybrid for a long time and prove rather immune to political change (Wheatley and Zurcher 2008).[14] Clearly the Party still dominates the state and its main assets and even controls the commanding heights of the economy through the nomenklatura system. In fact the country seems to have entered a gray zone of “dominant-power politics” where it is neither clearly dictatorial not clearly heading towards democracy. So instead of regime breakdown, we see regime resilience – authoritarian resilience to use a concept borrowed from Andrew Nathan.

At the same time competitive elements have been introduced and the prediction is that such competition will be expanded in the coming years. This is not necessarily part of a transition to democracy as transitologists would claim. It is rather part of a process of turning “resilient authoritarianism” into a kind of “competitive authoritarianism”, where more voices are allowed, but the

outcome is still determined by skewing the playing field in favour of the incumbent, i.e. the Chinese Communist Party.

The Chinese political regime is overwhelming focused on stability. The core elite have succeeded in turning stability and harmony into the dominant ideological discourse and in the process it has acquired new legitimacy. The current global financial crisis will have negative consequences for the economic foundation of this stability and may create a new discourse of instability and danger. However, it appears likely that the Party-state for the time being will continue to be able to cope with such challenges.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Bruce Gilley, China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Cheng Li, *China's Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Merle Goldman, "The Phrase 'Democracy and China' are not a Contradiction," in Mark Mohr (ed.), *China and Democracy: A Contradictory in Terms?* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006).

[2] See Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2002), pp. 5-21.

[3] Ibid., pp. 6-9.

[4] Carothers criticism of "transitology" is primarily directed at O'Donnell and Schmitters seminal work on democratic transitions, especially their *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986). Other works within the transition paradigm includes Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); and Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu and Hung-mao Tien (eds), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1997). O'Donnell answers Carother's criticism in his "In Partial Defense of an Evanescent 'Paradigm'", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 6-12.

[5] Ibid., p. 12.

[6] Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001); Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Anatomy of Collapse," *New York Review of Books*, September 26, 1991, pp. 5-9: Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Carmbridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[7] Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[8] Pei, *China's Trapped Transition*. See also his *China's Governance Crisis*, China Review, Autumn-Winter 2002, pp. 7-10.

[9] Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Resilient Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No.1 (January 2003): 6-17; David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Zheng Yongnian, *Bringing the Party Back In: How China is Governed* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004); Bruce Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[10] Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Governing Capacity and Institutional Change in China in the Reform Era," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, Issue 1 (2010), pp. 20-35.

[11] For the concept of "competitive authoritarianism, see" Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[12] For a summary of the model see Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "Introduction: The Fragmented Authoritarianism Model and Its Limitations," in Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (eds.), *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 1-32. See also David M. Lampton," The Implementation Problem in Post-Mao China," in David M. Lampton (ed.), *Policy-Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[13] Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Power* (2011).

[14]Jonathan Wheatley and Christopher Zurcher, "On the Origin and Consolidation of Hybrid Regimes," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* , Vol. 4. No. 1, pp. 1-32

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