

# Barriers to democratization in china



This article presents and enlightens the rationale for the failure of China in establishing a democratic system. Such topic is broad and extensive apparently because it attempts to explain the natural flow of democratization with relation to China that has yet to establish a democratic system. This also endeavors to enhance the understanding of democratization process on a certain country.

The whole presentation of barriers to Chinese democratization is divided into phases and provides analytical framework in the further understanding of the nature of democratization process.

Such phases are consisting of several factors which serve as the subordinate topics in demonstrating the impacts of these factors on Chinese democratization. Chinese Democratization Chinese democratization is of immense importance, both practically and theoretically. Although it is only one country, China represents between one-fifth and one-fourth of the world's population. According to Rummel (1991), " due to the undemocratic systems in twentieth-century China, millions suffered from political persecution and died unnatural deaths.

" For example, more than twenty million starved to death in the famine of 1959-61. As late as 1989, hundreds of unarmed civilians were mowed down in the capital city of Beijing. Democracy may not work miracles, but it can avoid such tragedies (Rummel 1991). Presenting Barriers to Chinese Democracy I. Historical Legacy and Democracy This part of the article presents the assessment of the potential impact of historical legacy on the process of democratization in China. The general conditions, political thoughts, and political traditions go under this first factor.

It initially looks at how some general conditions constrain Chinese political development and compares political thoughts with modern democracy and examines the way democratic or undemocratic Chinese political traditions were. Historical legacies are not of equal importance. Some are trivial and transitory, such as people's dress. Others are substantial and stable, such as people's ways of treating one another. Modern democracy resulted from the interaction between Western traditions and modernization.

Given China's different historical path and its low level of modernization, its democratization process was in the grip of its historical legacies. By focusing on general conditions, political thoughts, and political traditions, this chapter suggests that China's historical legacies pose a challenge to the democratization process. The vast territory and diverse conditions always create problems for governability and participation in traditional times. A long history tends to foster a cynical view of politics, just as a short history may facilitate an idealistic view of politics.

A huge population not only decreases people's incentive for participation, but also renders it difficult to change the rules of the game. China's relative isolation from the West cost the Chinese the opportunity to learn from a great and dynamic civilization. All these forms formidable force of inertia that slows down and even blocks attempts to adopt new systems and habits in China. Indeed, few Western thoughts before the modern time were democratic, but the Athenian political and intellectual experiences, the Roman conception of citizenship and law, and Christianity's conception of humanity did facilitate democracy as we know it today.

By contrast, Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism, and Taoism contained some democratic elements, but none qualified as being democratic because of their failure to advocate popular sovereignty and individual liberty. As the dominant ideology in China, Confucianism was paternalistic in preaching benevolence and propriety. Despite its good intentions, its differences from democracy were huge. Kant's remark that paternalism is the worst form of tyranny contains some truth. What further separates China from the West is their political traditions. Feudalism had dominated the West for a long time.

It was characterized by its lack of equality, liberty, and a powerful central government. It deserves mentioning that not until the early 1860s were serfdom and slavery abolished in Russia and the United States, respectively. Against this historical background, the middle class in the West not only demanded equality and freedom denied by feudal systems, but also attempted to limit the rising power of the central government after the decline of feudalism. By contrast, traditional China witnessed a great deal of socioeconomic equality and freedom.

Chinese political and economic systems allowed for a high level of social mobility. So the call for freedom and equality appealed less to the Chinese than to the Europeans. Compared with its European counterparts, the Chinese government was powerful. Theoretically, all the land and people belonged to the emperor. But China's vast territory and traditional technology softened the impact of a bureaucratic empire. There were both enlightened and despotic rulers in Chinese history. When tyranny accompanied socioeconomic hardship, the Chinese exercised their right of rebellion.

As a result, Chinese history seemed to be trapped in a “ dynastic cycle. ” Without modernization and foreign contacts, China might have found it difficult to break this cycle. II. Local Forces and Democracy During the second half of the 19th century, China experienced the decline of central power in contrast to the rise of many countries like the U. S. , Italy, and Prussia. In particular, the Taiping Rebellion which endured from 1851-64 had affected almost all the provinces in China proper, devastated its most prosperous regions, and had cost 20 to 40 million people dead.

What further undermined the central power was the Nien Rebellion in the north from 1851 to 1868, the Miao Rebellion in the southwest from 1855 to 1872, and the Moslem Rebellion in the northwest from 1862 to 1878. Collectively, these are referred to as local forces that decisively affect the democratization process in the Republican era. The establishment of the republic did not imply that the Chinese were willing or able to maintain democracy. Before the 1911 Revolution, most Chinese had no preference for democratic republicanism, and those who advocated democracy treated it less as an end than as a means to national power and wealth.

But the revolution ruled out the possibility of establishing a new monarchy in China and ushered in the era of republicanism. The entire Republican era was mainly shaped by the shifting balance of power between the central government and local forces. Since the mid-nineteenth century, foreign powers and local forces had undermined the Manchu regime. During the 1911 Revolution, the independence of provinces doomed the Qing dynasty. Since the local forces continued to threaten the new republic, a strongman was needed to rule China.

Yuan Shih-kai's fight against disintegration served national interests and commanded widespread support. But his monarchical scheme discredited him, and his death created an opportunity for the rise of warlordism. During the warlord period, the central government not only lost control of local forces, but also was manipulated by powerful warlords. Against this background, the Nationalists cooperated with the Soviet Union to achieve national unification. The rise of local forces was nothing new in China. With its vast territory, regional diversity, and traditional technology, the empire always faced the danger of division.

Since the respective authorities of central and local governments were not clearly defined, the central government might have too much or too little power. On balance, the former was a lesser evil than the latter. While rational rulers had little intention to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, the lack of legitimacy motivated local satraps to maximize their profits. The Chinese fear of local forces appeared unwarranted in the eyes of foreigners, but it constituted a self-fulfilling prophecy. Idealizing a unitary system, many Chinese leaders would resort to violence and war for the sake of national unification.

Accordingly, the fear of local forces led to war, which in turn justified people's original fear. If the establishment of the new republic had little to do with the Chinese people's democratic conviction, partisan conflict, domestic turmoil, and civil wars in the Republican era made the Chinese disillusioned with democracy. Indeed, democracy does not necessarily weaken state power, and no real democracy was put into practice in China. But there is no denying that the early phase of democratization tends to unleash divisive

forces. Through legitimating diverse interests democracy risks undermining the central power.

Historical examples abound. A weak confederation followed the American Revolution. Fortunately, the founding fathers opted for a federal system, which struck a balance between central and local powers. Like many other countries, post-Revolution China experienced chaos and civil wars. The Revolution was intended to strengthen state power, but contributed to its further decline. The painful experience in the Republican era convinced the Chinese that a weak and divisive country needed a strong government, and that dictatorship represented a lesser evil than anarchy. III. World System and Democracy

All countries have been dragged into the world system in the contemporary times. Unfortunately, this foreign system is unbeneficial to weaker countries and a monster that is beyond their control. It is no exaggeration, as Toynbee (1969) declares, to say that their modern history is one of their responses to foreign challenges. Before the end of World War II, China was one of the disadvantaged countries having deplorable status in the effect of world system's adversity to democratization processes. Without the modern world system, democratization might not have become an issue in China.

However, such a system militated against the process of democratization in the Nationalist era in several ways. First, the nature of the world system was undemocratic, if not antidemocratic. What characterized this system was power politics and capitalism. The former treated might as right; the latter sought profits and ignored equality. To survive in such a world required a

strong state, but not necessarily a democratic one. Given China's low status in the world, the Chinese desired wealth and power rather than democracy.

In fact, the Chinese accepted democracy, less because they embraced the value itself than because they saw it as a method to strengthen the state power. Second, liberal democracy was less attractive than it is today. Internal disturbance and foreign threats in 1930s provided the best justification for dictatorship. No wonder that the Nationalist government and many Chinese intellectuals found dictatorship both necessary and desirable. Third, the Japanese aggression made the Chinese democratization almost irrelevant.

Indeed, the Sino-Japanese War facilitated partisan cooperation, stimulated Chinese nationalism, and helped democratize the world system. But amid foreign aggression, national survival took precedence over the call for democracy and human rights. Equally important, the war catapulted the Communists into formidable power and exacerbated socioeconomic problems the Nationalists had never been able to handle. As a result, a democratic solution to China's political, economic, and social problems became difficult, if not impossible. Lastly, the Cold War system affected Chinese political development.

The victory of the Soviet Union in World War II and the expansion of socialism into East Europe boosted the reputation of socialism in comparison with liberal democracy. Both superpowers wanted to increase their own influence in China and sided with either the Nationalists or the Communists. It was no exaggeration to say that the evolution of the world system made possible the Communist triumph. IV. Socialist Values and Democracy



Although the Mao era did well in promoting socioeconomic equality and deserved credit for encouraging mass participation, socialist China did not qualify as democracy as we know it.

The one-party rule excluded the possibility for citizens to select rulers. Civil and political rights were ignored, if not flagrantly violated. The house-registration system and class label contravened the principles of liberty and equality. Millions suffered from political persecution. Even among the party itself, powerful struggles were frequent and cruel. What was worse, the Communists did not deliver on their own material promise. Living standards in Maoist China barely increased. In explaining the lack of democracy in China, one cannot ignore the role of Mao.

It was Mao who hastened the socialist transformation, led the AntiRightists Campaign, initiated the Great Leap, encouraged the people's communes, reversed the sensible guidelines of the Eighth Congress, and launched the Cultural Revolution. Without him, Chinese socialism would have taken different shape. But even without him, there would have been little chance for socialist China to be democratic. Authors like Berger (1993) and Almond (1991) believe that “ the reality is that although countries with market economies have not necessarily been democratic, all democracies have coexisted with market economies”.

Advocates of socialism see no contradiction between socialism and democracy. Ralph Miliband, for example, maintains that “ socialist democracy would embody many of the features of liberal democracy, including the rule of law, the separation of powers, civil liberties, political pluralism, and a vibrant civil society, but it would give them much more

effective meaning. It would seek the democratization of the state and of society at all levels (Miliband p. 117). This theoretical possibility has not yet translated into reality.

C. B. MacPherson is more sophisticated in arguing that although existing socialist countries do not guarantee political freedom, this does not imply that socialism inevitably conflicts with democracy. He attributes the socialist failure in this respect to three specific factors. According to MacPherson (1973), " socialist countries were established in underdeveloped countries; they faced the hostility of Western powers; and their birth in revolution or civil war entailed the restriction of freedom. "

The conflict between socialism and democracy cannot merely be explained by historical circumstances, but should be explained by the nature of both socialist revolution and the socialist system. By aiming at abolishing private property, socialist revolution inevitably invites the strongest opposition from all ruling and propertied classes. As a result, socialists have to rely on violence to achieve their objective. Moreover, many scholars, like Belden (1949) and Talmon (1960) find the socialist preference for collective over individual rights to be at the root of totalitarianism.

As early as 1848, Tocqueville stated that " democracy extends the sphere of individual freedom; socialism restricts it. Democracy attaches all possible value to each man; socialism makes each man a mere agent, a mere number. Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word: equality. But notice the difference: as quoted in Hayek (1972) that " while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and

servitude. ” The dictatorship of the proletariat may intend to serve the vast majority of the people, but it bodes ill for democracy and human rights.

Lenin defines dictatorship as “ nothing more or less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force” (Lenin p. 353). Socialists’ emphasis on class character ignores humanity and individuality, and their call for class struggle damages the social fabric. By dehumanizing class enemies, they tolerate and even extol the abuse of human rights. Not least of all, even if socialist rulers are well intentioned, a socialist economy provides the best pedestal for despotism.

Public ownership and planned economy enable an all-powerful state to control people’s livelihood, to limit their freedom, and to foster their passivity and fear. V. Economic Development and Democracy Deng Xiaoping’s Era  
Deng’s reform policy was less political democratization than economic development. Nevertheless, close relations between these two processes determined that he had an important role to play in the process of democratization (Shambaugh 1995). Economic development and political democratization are both desirable, but they sometimes compete and even conflict with each other.

Deng’s preference for economic development over political democratization was understandable. Human beings are more economic animals than political ones. Democracy appeals less to poor people in poor countries, and Deng’s political liberalization further decreased the Chinese desire for democracy. Deng first instituted the responsibility system in the countryside and later abolished the commune system. At the same time, he did his best

to integrate China into the outside world. The success in rural reform shifted Deng's attention to urban reform.

Despite its limitations, the economic reform increased the people's living standard, boosted the private sector, substituted a market economy for a planned economy, and internationalized the Chinese economy. All these had positive impacts on democratization, because they reduced the state power over the society, expanded an autonomous economic realm, decreased the elite's interest in seeking political power, and motivated better-off and better-educated people to demand more freedom and rights.

Economic reforms, however, could not be deepened without political reform. Twice Deng wanted to institute political reforms, but they fell short of expectations. Deng never embraced liberal democracy. For him, democracy represented a means to economic development. When it jeopardized stability and unity, it would be abandoned. But Deng's political reform received less credit than it deserves. Elections were permitted at local levels. Legal reforms moved China closer to the rule of law. With his administrative reform, old cadres gradually gave way to new technocrats.

Although the Chinese did not enjoy positive freedom to participate in government affairs, they were granted negative freedom in their social and economic life. In short, Deng's political reform represented a change in system rather than a change of system, and was characterized not by democratization but by liberalization and institutionalization. Deng's economic reform was a two-edged sword, providing more legitimacy to the Communist rule, and causing social unrest and public protests. The 1989 Tiananmen Incident reflected and reinforced the legitimacy crisis.

The mass protests originated from people's dissatisfaction with their economic situations and social injustice, but did not mean that they wanted to overthrow Communist rule. Although the repression temporarily stabilized the situation, the legitimacy crisis became much severer. Like most authoritarian rulers, Deng had no choice but to rely on further economic development to regain legitimacy. Since then, Chinese leaders and people have followed the East Asian model, putting development before democratization.

Conclusion All of the above factors presented are apparently legitimate and convincing when it comes to the realities happening in China. These barriers are enough to provide answers to the issue of China democratization. This presentation provides knowledge with such potential factors and significantly deepens our knowledge of the nature of democratization process in a selected country. References Almond, Gabriel. "Capitalism and Democracy," in *PS: Political Science and Politics*. September 1991: pp. 467-74.

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