

Book Review: Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 251 pp. plus notes, index.

Will China Democratize? If So, When and How?

Joseph Fewsmith

Prediction is an occupational hazard in the China field. People have been trying to predict the future of China for many decades, and, for all that the political scientists tell us about “path dependency,” the track record has not been very good. Remember when people argued that the Chinese were too individualistic to adopt communism? Too nationalistic to ally with the Soviet Union? Too ideological to break with the Soviet Union? Too wedded to Maoist verities to embark on a meaningful marketization of the economy? Too needful of public support to crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square? Too bankrupt ideologically to survive the crackdown on Tiananmen protestors? Understanding the condition of Chinese politics at any one moment is difficult enough, but Bruce Gilley has ventured to write not just a speculative article but a whole book about the “democratic future” of China. Whatever else one thinks of the book, one has to give Gilley credit for taking on such a difficult—one is tempted to say impossible—task.

Gilley certainly deserves credit for more than courage, however. Gilley, a long-time observer of China as a journalist before returning to graduate school (surely one of the first doctoral students to *enter* graduate school with three published books—the book under review is his fourth, fifth if one includes his joint effort with Andrew Nathan on *China's New Leaders*), brings an extensive knowledge of China and of democratic theory to his prediction of how and why China will democratize.

Intelligently, Gilley refuses to be pinned down on when China's democratization will occur—he says “[i]t could be tomorrow or it could take a decade or more”(p. xi)—but it is not the general prediction that eventually the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will cease to rule China (don't all political parties eventually give up power?) that gives this book interest, but rather

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the conviction both that this transition will happen *sooner* than later and the belief that one can sketch out, at least in broad terms, *how* it will happen. In trying to outline the future evolution of China, Gilley has laid out an extremely ambitious project indeed.

It is useful to start with *why* China will democratize. Gilley builds his case on two pillars. First, he argues that China's transition, like other democratic breakthroughs, will be the result of a "crisis of dictatorship" (p. 9). And, second, Gilley, argues that the collapse of authoritarian rule in China will be followed by democracy because there is great "democratic potential" (p. 10) in China, both historically and contemporaneously. Historically, Gilley argues that China has shown great religious toleration (p. 12). Readers of Anthony Yu (*State and Religion in China*, Carus Publishing, 2005) will regard such generalizations with skepticism. Gilley also cites one Chinese democratic advocate as saying, "Liberalism is not an import. It's a basic value deeply imbedded in China's traditional culture" (p.12). Li Shenzhi, one of the great liberal thinkers of the late twentieth century, knew better. Finally, Gilley argues that China's nationalism has the potential to support democracy. Maybe. But the relationship between nationalism and democracy is problematic at best, both in modern China and elsewhere—as Li Zehou, Li Shenzhi, and many other prominent intellectuals have been all too aware. In any case, it is nothing less than breathtaking for Gilley to review China's "democratic potential" in four and one-half pages. Surely there is such a potential; but just as surely it is far more complex than this overview would suggest.

Looking at contemporary China, Gilley sees much potential, both in the ideas of intellectuals and political leaders, alike, and in evolving socio-economic conditions. On the idea of democracy, Gilley seems to pick from widely divergent sources to show that there is wide-spread support for democracy within the party and society. For instance, he cites former party secretary Zhao Ziyang and party elder Bo Yibo on the need for the party to take the initiative on democratic reform (p. 23), but those quotes come from the *Tiananmen Papers*, the provenance of which is highly disputed. Gilley would certainly have been better off quoting from Wu Guoguang's book on the political reform group that Zhao set up in the late 1980s—but that raises the question of how democracy was thought of in the 1980s and the way that it is thought of today. (Gilley also hopes that Zhao Ziyang would come out to join a democratic movement [p. 122], which, alas, cannot happen now that he has gone to see Marx.) Certainly, there are many intellectuals who agree with the Central Party School scholar who said, "The serious lagging of political reform is now a major obstacle to sustainable economic growth" (p. 40), but that raises the questions of what is meant by "political reform," what steps might be involved, and, indeed, what might be meant by "democratic." This reviewer has talked with many intellectuals and party officials who believe that China is more democratic today than it was only a few years ago and that it must continue to move toward democracy—but who see this democratic

transition as lasting many more years and being considerably more gradual than does Gilley, who envisions a crisis occurring in the not too distant future, followed by a democratic transition.

Indeed, this difference in vision is worth exploring. Gilley envisions a China in which a weakened CCP, unwilling to launch democratic reform for fear of losing its power, collapses in the face of a “national trauma” (p. 102) that is accompanied by popular mobilization (p. 106) and violence (p. 108). This is where those in China who believe in gradual transition differ most sharply from Gilley. They favor a gradual transition because they do not believe that democratic governance—the elite-led transition to democracy that Gilley envisions—can emerge from a situation in which the party is weakened and is losing power in the face of popular mobilization and violence. Indeed, it is precisely that fear of popular mobilization and violence that leads so many people to work within a structure that they know is deeply flawed, but they hope can be improved step-by-step.

This is the lynchpin of Gilley’s vision—that “regime-led extrication” is the “most likely path from power for the CCP” (p. 118). Here, one is concerned that visions of the spring of 1989 still linger. Like a general fighting the last war, Gilley seems to have a vision of a new Tiananmen-style movement, but one in which democratic advocates emerge victorious. One might add that the hundred pages of text that follow this prediction are not worth much if this one critical prediction should prove wrong. Gilley recognizes this. As he says on p. 153, “Democratic consolidation is a contingent process that depends on the already contingent transition that has preceded it. Before we were dealing in possibilities derived from facts, here we are dealing with possibilities derived from other possibilities.” But most observers in China are willing to place their bets (both intellectual and career) on the hope of a gradual transition rather than on crisis and “extrication.” Why? My guess is that many people see hope in the gradual institution building that has been going on in China over the past decade and more and fear that a sudden crisis would not result in democratic transition but rather in the collapse of still very fragile institutions. There may also be other reasons for the different estimate of so many Chinese observers. Many intellectuals in China implicitly give a very elite interpretation to the term “democracy.” They seem to believe that democracy means wide consultation with those who should be consulted, either so that the “correct” answer can be ascertained or so that interests can be appropriately “adjusted” (*xietiao*). The result is more important than the process, and voting may exacerbate “social contradictions” rather than resolve them. There is also the urban, and especially elite, fear that giving the vote to peasants would overturn everything that has been gained so slowly over recent years.

Gilley sees things in very different terms. He believes that a democratic elite will emerge from a crisis. He might be right, but it is not at all clear where their legitimacy will derive from and whether that legitimacy can be maintained long enough to establish strong democratic institutions. Many

Chinese who hope for gradual transition to democracy believe the cost of the sort of crisis that Gilley believes is inevitable is just too high, and they are unwilling to take the chance.

This leads to my final concern. Gilley is so certain in his vision that he wants it to become central to U.S. foreign policy. As he puts it, “The single overarching aim of U.S. policy toward China should be to bring about as rapid and smooth a transition to democracy as possible” (p. 79). I could not disagree more strongly. Anyone who has followed Chinese discourse in recent years can see that the more the United States has tried to make morality a core part of our foreign policy, the more Chinese intellectuals have reacted with nationalistic resentment. Joint programs that focus on the building of law, the creation of better welfare systems, or the creation of more effective government institutions are welcomed. Lecturing in a moralistic fashion is rejected. The connection between precisely the sort of engagement that Gilley rejects and the maintenance of U.S. “soft power” (which has been critical in starting China moving precisely along the lines Gilley would like to see China move) should be apparent to any serious observer of Sino-U.S. relations. Giving up that power of moral suasion for feel-good moralism would not only not work (nothing the CCP likes better than an enemy!) but also would likely bring about precisely the opposite effect.

To my reading, Gilley’s account is too contingent on an optimistic outcome of a crisis situation to be persuasive. But in laying out an argument about the evolution and democratization of Chinese society, Gilley has challenged us all to think more clearly about the factors involved in shaping China’s future.