

Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond, eds., *Political Change in China: Comparisons with Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), vii plus 309 pages.

Political Change across the Strait Not Necessarily Parallel

Andrew J. Nathan

It is natural to ask, as Larry Diamond puts it in his chapter in this volume, whether “political change in China [will] follow (more or less) the logic of Taiwan’s transition.” In Taiwan, a Chinese society under the authoritarian rule of a Leninist party first underwent modernization and the growth of a middle class, and then made a peaceful transition to democracy. The case is often cited to demonstrate both the inevitability of democratization in modernizing societies and democracy’s compatibility with Chinese culture. But might China follow a different path? After all, it is much larger, lacks a majority ethnic group that is alienated from the regime, and is less vulnerable than Taiwan to Western cultural and political influence.

In this volume, noted specialists break down the puzzle of Taiwan-China comparison into component parts, and come up with clashing views on whether the two paths of development will be similar. The editors of the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* invited me to review the book, even though I have connections of one kind or another with most of the contributors and participated as a commentator in the conference on which the volume is based, which was sponsored by the Democracy in Taiwan research program at Stanford University.

The contributors are too smart to make firm predictions about China’s future, but nonetheless fall pretty clearly into two camps. Leading the “yes” side is coeditor Bruce Gilley, author of *China’s Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (Columbia University Press, 2004). Gilley points out that it will take China until some time around the year 2025 to become as modernized as Taiwan was at the time of its democratic transition (in GDP per capita terms, measured on a purchasing power parity basis), so we should not look for similar democratization pressures to be felt quite yet.

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But neither on the other hand can we expect transition to occur automatically when Chinese GDP per capita hits that level. Rather, societies at a given level of modernization can develop in different ways depending on subjective and political factors, such as elites' normative commitment to democracy and the contingent decisions of people in power when a legitimacy crisis occurs.

This indeterminacy does not, however, make China's future too murky for Gilley to analyze. First, implicitly, he takes it as given that a regime crisis will occur in China sooner or later. This is the least developed part of his analysis: he asks "what would a democratic transition in China look like," without asking the prior question of whether it will occur at all. But we can grant the assumption of a coming crisis as a reasonable basis for analysis, given that the Chinese regime has faced at least one serious crisis already (in 1989) and belongs to a type of regime (Leninist) that has collapsed in more places than it has survived. Second, given a crisis, Gilley sees the reform debates in the Chinese leadership as giving sufficient evidence that prodemocracy ideas are influential, and he expects those ideas to gain further appeal as China develops. If these two points are granted, it makes sense to ask not whether a democratic transition will occur but "what would a democratic transition in China look like?"

To answer this question, Gilley synthesizes a great deal of comparative and theoretical material to construct two frameworks for analysis. First, he provides a typology of types of democratic transition, ranging from those in which strong societies overthrow weak states to those in which weak societies are repressed by strong states (in which case, transition fails). Along this continuum, he argues, China in the future is likely to be found where Taiwan was in the past—somewhere around the middle, in the category of systems where both state and society are strong and where the path of transition is therefore a form of state-led democratization. Within this category, Taiwan's transition belonged to the type called "conversion," in which "the state undertakes a deliberate, planned move to democracy under only moderate pressure from social forces." China's would likely belong to a neighboring type, "extrication," because we can expect the Chinese state to enter the next crisis in fairly strong condition, but also to face a strong society. Extrication is a type of state-led democratization that is carried out in "a more hurried or crisis-ridden" way because of greater social pressure.

Second, Gilley offers a theory of eight transition stages, starting with crisis and moving through an elite split and hard-line backlash, to a democratic decision, and finally to a founding election. Gilley sees the elements prospectively in place for each of these stages to take place when the time comes. The masses are dissatisfied enough to mobilize, the elites are divided enough to split, the hardliners are weakened enough so that they may—although they may not—lose the ultimate power struggle, and there are sufficient protodemocratic institutions in place (such as the constitutionally sovereign National People's Congress) to provide a glide path to democracy. This is a sensible scenario for

how a democratic transition might happen in China—if it happens.

Two other chapters support Gilley's view that China may follow the Taiwan model. Yun-han Chu draws on survey research data from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to show that popular values in all three societies have evolved in similar, prodemocratic ways under the impact of modernization. Traditional values emphasizing family loyalty and conflict avoidance are weakest in most-modernized Hong Kong and strongest in China, while democratic values favoring political equality and popular accountability are weakest in China and strongest in Hong Kong (attitudes favoring political pluralism lagged in popularity in all three societies). Within societies, traditional values weakened and democratic values strengthened from the first set of surveys in 1993 to the second set of surveys in 2002. And across social categories, urban, younger, and better-educated people (those more exposed to the forces of modernization) are less traditional-minded and, in general, more democratically-inclined than those in the countryside and those who are older or have less education. This suggests that, as time goes by, the Chinese regime will find its authoritarian style of rule out of synch with the values of a better-educated and more urban public.

A similar process of evolution is taking place at the level of institutions, according to Randall Peerenboom and Weitseng Chen. Focusing on the legal system, they argue that Taiwan made the transition from a lawless system to a rule-of-law system largely during the authoritarian period. The regime built up independent courts, fostered the professionalization of the police, trained lawyers, and provided safety-valve institutions for citizens to litigate against government officials. Constitutional organs began to play their designated roles with some degree of independence from the ruling party. This gradual strengthening of legal institutions is part of modernization—Peerenboom and Chen dub it the East Asian Model because it also occurred in other East Asian systems—and it is happening in China. Legal evolution supports democratization in two ways. First, it tends to produce a demand for greater government accountability; second, when a democratic transition happens, the institutional substructure is there to allow the transition to succeed.

So much for the optimists. The volume's other contributors enlist more or less clearly on the pessimistic side of the question. Three essays besides Yun-han Chu's address social forces. Merle Goldman and Ashley Esarey scrutinize the role of intellectuals in the two societies. Although they see dissidents pushing for democracy in both places, they find the Chinese system more repressive and the media less free than in late-authoritarian Taiwan. Unless intellectuals are accorded more space to address political questions, they conclude, democratization will be hard to achieve. Addressing the role of religious groups, Richard Madsen comes to a similar conclusion: in Taiwan, the state fostered the growth of religious organizations that provided "bridging social capital"; in China, the state either controls or represses religious organizations. As a likely consequence, if a crisis occurs in China, state-society conflict will

be more intense and a smooth regime transition will be less likely. Looking at business groups, Dorothy Solinger finds that they were independent of the state in Taiwan but symbiotic with the regime in China, hence not likely to support a democracy movement there.

Three essays besides Peerenboom and Chen's address regime strategies. Robert Weller uses the concept of "responsive authoritarianism" to summarize the idea that the Chinese state allows the existence of localized forms of identity expression and political feedback, in such areas as religion and the environment, as ways not to relax its grip on society but to foster society's tolerance of and cooperation with the regime. Tun-jen Cheng and Gang Lin explain why local elections in Taiwan created pressure for democratic transition, while those in China do not. And Jacques deLisle argues that Taiwan was more vulnerable to international pressure for democratization than China is. Moreover, the global prestige of the "democracy" brand name has declined since the 1980s. Taiwan's own experience has been read in China as detracting from, rather than adding to, the appeal of democratization.

The volume's final nay-sayer is co-editor Larry Diamond, whose recent book, *The Spirit of Democracy* (Times Books, 2008) declares a global "democratic recession." China is not likely to follow the Taiwan path because it is too big, too powerful internationally, and perhaps most importantly, has not engaged in the same kind of decades-long process of building the substructure for democracy as Taiwan did, for the simple reason that the CCP leaders, unlike those in Taiwan, never wanted to guide their system to an eventual democratic "soft landing."

Diamond does not think—and probably neither do the other contributors—that the lack of a Taiwan precedent for China means that China's current system will survive indefinitely. Rather, the alternative, says Diamond, if China does not follow the Taiwan model, is some form of breakdown that will also lead eventually to democracy, but with more turbulence and suffering. Not all the authors address this point, but there seems to be a general consensus that China cannot remain authoritarian forever unless, perhaps, it stops modernizing. The question, then, is not whether China will democratize, but how. To paraphrase a line from a gangster movie, it can democratize the easy way or it can chose hard way, but it has to do it. Most of the contributors believe the Chinese leaders have chosen the hard way, because they refuse to prepare for the easy way as the leaders of Taiwan did.

Is it myopic to overlook the possibility that China may not democratize at all, but continue to adapt its authoritarian model to economic, social, and cultural change? U.S.-based political science tends to take a disproportionate interest in democracy—transitions to it, consolidations of it, and workings within it—and a disproportionate lack of interest in authoritarianism—its varieties, how they function, and how they evolve. After all, there have been many more authoritarian regimes in history than democratic regimes, in more types, and over a longer period of time. And since the third wave of democracy

has stalled and many new democracies are performing badly, why take for granted that all modernizing societies must eventually go democratic?

On the other hand, the book's prognostications may be tested sooner than the authors intended. As China confronts the global financial crisis and (as this is written) the regime puzzles over how to deal with the unprecedented challenge of Charter '08, signs gather that a crisis may indeed test the state's ability to transfer some significant measure of power to society peacefully, or not. Whatever happens, this set of studies gives us a more nuanced picture than we had before of how the democratization process worked in Taiwan, as well as a set of strong, focused insights into state-society relations in China on the eve of what may be a serious test of the system.

