

Democracy Is a Good Thing

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Over the past several months there has been a vigorous discussion about democracy in China. Some of this discussion has been undertaken by well-connected, policy-oriented intellectuals, while other parts of the discussion have been conducted by liberal intellectuals who appear to have little policy impact. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, including Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, has, in general terms, endorsed continuing to implement various forms of “inner-party democracy.” Although such calls should be welcomed, they come at an odd time—just as the change of leading cadres at the local levels has come to a conclusion. The discussion on democracy may promote more experimentation at the local level, but the Party center has been firm on the importance of “democratic centralism” and “scientific socialism”—not democratic socialism.

Party congresses are first and foremost about personnel arrangements: who gets promoted and who does not. Without a delicate combination of supporters and balancing of interests, Party leaders can find it difficult to implement their preferred policies. But Party congresses also make statements about political priorities. The general secretary of the Party always gives a “political report” that reflects the balance of opinion within the top leadership on the important issues of the day but also—and importantly—underscores where the general secretary stands. Thus, it was important in 1997 that Jiang Zemin, then subject to strong pressure from the left wing of the Party, strongly affirmed Deng Xiaoping’s approach to reform.

Although Party congresses are quinquennial affairs outlining the Party’s approach, that “consensus” often does not extend the five years until the next Party congress. The 12th Party Congress in 1982 endorsed Chen Yun’s conservative views on the relationship between planning and markets, but by the time Party delegates convened again, five years later, Zhao Ziyang had led the Party away from planning. Most striking, of course, was the 13th Party Congress’s endorsement of political structural reform in 1987, which disintegrated in the repression following Tiananmen in 1989. Nevertheless, congresses give outside analysts a glimpse into the balance of forces and opinion within the Party and indicate the way the Party is responding to the important issues of the day.

In the run-up to any Party congress, there is always a stream of commentary that appears in the press, intended to foreshadow where the leadership stands on important issues but also to lobby the political leadership to move more in one direction or another. It is in this context that the discussion on democracy over the past few months has been particularly interesting. For the first four years of Hu Jintao’s term, we have seen much discussion of party building, addressing the needs of those left behind in the course of

economic development, balancing economic development with environmental protection, and other topics, but there has relatively little discussion of democracy except in the various specialized Party journals that have discussed inner-Party and consultative democracy.

Since the end of last year, however, this discussion has broadened and attracted much attention—and considerable opposition. Careful examination of this discussion suggests that there are different strands in the discussion, some of which are likely to receive official backing at the congress and others that will clearly will not. Most interesting is the fact that these discussions have their origins in statements made by Hu Jintao.

Perhaps the discussions on democracy should be traced back to Hu Jintao's speech to the report meeting called to launch Jiang Zemin's *Selected Works* in August 2006. After praising Jiang's work effusively, Hu goes on to discuss how theoretical innovations *since* the 16th Party Congress (in other words, since Jiang retired) have built on and developed the Three Represents and other contributions Jiang made. In the course of this discussion, Hu says, "We will continue to . . . actively and yet prudently advance reform of the political system; perfect the democratic system; enrich the forms of democracy; build a socialist country ruled by law; promote socialist democracy in the system, standards, and procedures; expand citizens' orderly political participation; and guarantee the people's conduct of democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision of the law."¹

Four months later, in December 2006, Hu presided over a collective study session of the Politburo at which two well-known experts on local government—Xu Yong, a professor at Huazhong University, and Zhao Shukai, a researcher at the State Council Development Research Center—discussed issues of rural governance. Hu Jintao was reported as saying, "In developing socialist grassroots democratic politics, it is of utmost importance to guarantee the masses of people directly exercise their democratic rights to manage grassroots public affairs and public welfare undertakings and practice democratic supervision over cadres according to law."² Particularly this comment, which went unreported in the world press at the time (with the exception of the Indian press, which was convinced that Hu had been influenced by the Indian practice of democracy during his recent state visit), seems to have created an atmosphere that spurred a wider-ranging discussion.

Democracy Is a Good Thing

In late December, Yu Keping, deputy director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau and head of the Center for Chinese Government Innovations at Beijing University, published an article, "Democracy Is a Good Thing," in the paper of the Central Party School. The boldness of Yu's topic, the article's publication in such an important paper, and Yu's reputation as an influential government advisor all attracted much attention. Yu's short article was surprisingly blunt. Yu states flatly that "for some

officials, who care more about their self-interest, democracy is not a good thing,” and he went on to declare that “among all political systems that have been invented and practiced by humankind so far, democracy is the one having the fewest defects.”

In making his case for democracy, Yu cites Hu Jintao’s “recent” statement that “without democracy, there will be no democratization.” It is not clear when Hu made this statement, but it is evident that Yu takes it as permission to discuss democratization.

Moreover, Yu defends democracy not on utilitarian grounds but in terms of values. As he puts it, “Even if people have the best food, clothing, housing, and transportation, but they have no democratic rights, then people still do not have complete human dignity.” Such claims are rarely made, at least openly.

Yu was not casting in his lot with China’s political dissidents. On the contrary, in keeping with his long-standing belief in “incremental democracy,”³ Yu was advocating incremental reform of China’s political system to increase the democratic quotient. As he put it, “practicing democracy without regard to the necessary conditions may cause disastrous consequences for the state and the people.” For many years, Yu has headed a program that identifies “innovation” in local government and rewards the innovators, and his bold statement that “democracy is a good thing” is in keeping with his belief that China’s political system can be slowly pushed in a more democratic direction.

Gaining far less attention was another Yu Keping article, also in *Study Times*, the previous week. In that article, Yu discusses the importance of citizen participation, which he sees as important to enhancing the stability of the society, restraining the abuse of power, and bringing about better policy. He calls for the government to open up more channels for citizen participation by establishing specific laws and mechanisms that would regulate their participation.⁴ Yu’s article obviously builds on calls by Hu Jintao and contained in Party resolutions to increase citizen participation over time.

Hong Kong’s *Ta Kung Pao* highlighted the importance of Yu, calling him a “mastermind” of the central leadership who rarely gives interviews because of his “special identity.” Influence is notoriously difficult in China, and it seems difficult to call Yu (or perhaps anyone else) a “mastermind,” but there is little doubt that Yu is well connected in Beijing.⁵

Wen Jiabao on Democracy

In late February, shortly before the National People’s Congress was convened, Premier Wen Jiabao published an article in *People’s Daily*, in which he said that the “socialist system and democratic politics are not mutually exclusive” and that it is “entirely possible for us to build a democratic country with the rule of law under socialist conditions.”⁶ Elaborating on his views on democracy at his press conference at the conclusion of the NPC, Wen declared that “socialist democracy is, in the final analysis, to let the people be the masters of the country.” He also said that political reform, “with

developing democratic politics as the goal,” was one of the two major reforms China was undertaking, the other being economic reform.⁷

Wang Changjiang on Inner-Party Democracy

In March, Wang Changjiang, head of the Party Building Section at the Central Party School, published an article in *Theoretical Trends*, which was subsequently republished in *Beijing Ribao*, on his understanding of democracy. Wang starts by criticizing the oft-heard view that the “quality” (*suzhi*) of the Chinese people is insufficient to support democratic politics. He points out that in 1937, when the quality of the Chinese people was far less than it is today, the Party promulgated the “Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia Election Regulations” which not only called for elections but allowed those who were illiterate (most of the population) to vote with beans. If the Communist Party could hold elections 70 years ago, then surely it can expand democracy today.

Reflecting the sensitivity of discussions on democracy, Wang is very careful to distinguish between democracy as a concept and “Western-style democracy” which he, in accordance with Party policy, argues cannot be “copied” (*zhaoban*). Although Wang argues that democracy is the “common crystallization of humankind” and that China can borrow practices from the West, he makes an argument that democracy can exist within a one-party system as long as that one party can bring together the different interests of society.

Wang’s argument is sophisticated. He does not rest his argument on democracy always generating correct decisions or on its efficiency. On the contrary, he argues that democracy is useful because it reduces the risk of erroneous decisions and spreads the responsibility for decision making. If everyone has participated in making a decision that turns out to be wrong, then people have nobody to blame but themselves. Democracy can also prevent extreme decisions from being made. For example, he cites Mao Zedong as saying that Stalinism could never have occurred in Western capitalist countries.

In the final analysis, Wang rests his case for democracy on the continued expansion of China’s market economy. The development of the market economy acknowledges that people have legitimate individual interests, and the development of the market economy simply requires the development of democracy.⁸

Wang does not disparage the development of “consultative democracy,” but he is not content to rest there. As he puts it in some of his other writings, “without elections, there is no democracy.”⁹ Elections, Wang says, “are not the patent of the West.” It is quite apparent from Wang’s various articles that the ideas of democracy and elections are under pressure from several directions. Wang readily admits that there have been problems in the implementation of local-level elections—clans can manipulate elections, sometimes there is corruption, and Party leadership can be weakened—but he nevertheless argues that elections are the only way to resolve the tensions between citizens and the cadres. When conflicts erupt, citizens naturally stand together against the

cadres, even if the latter's decisions are correct. Indeed, enhancing the legitimacy of decisions and the leadership is the primary motivation for implementing elections (as well as other democratic procedures such as public hearings and consultative democracy) at the local level.

Perhaps most controversially, Wang argues that some democratic breakthroughs should be permitted even if they conflict with laws and regulations. For instance, some villages and townships have experimented with the direct election of Party secretaries and committees, but have been overturned by higher levels. Wang says that "many Party members, common people, and cadres" have been unhappy with these decisions by higher levels, and "some have even questioned whether our party is truly pursuing democracy." Wang pointedly observes, "Obviously this directly damages the confidence of the masses in the Party."¹⁰

As this example suggests, Wang sees the localities as generally supportive of democratic reforms—it can be difficult to be a local cadre confronted by the hostility of the people, and cadres are under orders to maintain social stability. The central government, which has an overall understanding of the circumstances in China and a responsibility to develop the country, is also supportive of local democracy. But those in the middle, who face neither the pressures of the people nor bear responsibility for the direction of reform, are unenthusiastic and, indeed, hostile. As Wang puts it, "The obstacle is in the middle, especially the state ministries and commissions. Since recentralizing so much authority, they are very powerful, but they do not bear the corresponding responsibility and they do not have much motivation for reform."¹¹

Yanhuang Chunqiu Stirs the Pot

Yanhuang chunqiu is a liberal journal run by a number of former officials and intellectuals, headed by Du Daozheng, the former head of the General Press and Publications Office of the State Council. As someone who readily admits to a leftist past, Du has been making amends in his old age by running perhaps the most liberal-minded periodical in contemporary China. Du's status as a former minister-level official, as well as his extensive network of liberal officials, has afforded the journal some protection. This spring, in the run-up to 17th Party Congress, *Yanhuang chunqiu* has pushed the limits by running some very controversial articles that have bluntly challenged official interpretations of history.¹²

In February 2007, *Yanhuang chunqiu* published a hard-hitting article by Xie Tao, the 86-year-old former vice president of Chinese People's University (*Renmin daxue*). Xie praised the development of democratic socialism (not socialist democracy, the orthodoxy subscribed to by the CCP), particularly as it has developed in Europe, as realizing the ideals of Marxism. Accepting capitalism, but also having a large state component, democratic socialist states have raised incomes and closed the gaps between countryside and city, between workers and peasants, and between mental and physical labor—the three great divides Mao Zedong used to hope to overcome through

communization. Xie quotes Brezhnev as once telling his [Brezhnev's] brother, "What communism. This is all empty talk to delude the people." The Soviet leaders (is Xie suggesting those of China as well?) had "used a theory they did not believe in as the official ideology to cheat the people." "Why is it," Xie asks, "that we are still worshipping Leninism, something the Russians have discarded, like a deity and like a banner to be hoisted?"

Xie is responding not only to the state of contemporary China but to the upsurge of leftist activities in recent years. With apparent reference to the rise of populist criticism of reform, Xie writes, "But what is worth noting, with alert, is that the 'leftist' faction in the Party has become unusually active, playing on the discontent of a proportion of the masses to refute the fundamentals of reform and opening up, and calling for a return to Mao's era." He goes on to accuse the leftists of wanting to "mobilize a second Cultural Revolution to seize political power." The continued strength of leftism, Xie believes, is "the natural outcome of our ideological compromise and retreat over the past 27 years." No wonder he concludes by saying, "Political reform cannot be delayed any longer."

Xie Tao's article stirred heated argument throughout China. At least four large academic symposiums were held to discuss the ideas put forward in his article.¹³ Given the intense interest generated by the article, it is no surprise that *Yanhuang Chunqiu* continued to carry controversial pieces. For instance, in April, the journal carried Lu De's reflections on his father's thinking in his later years. His father was Lu Dingyi, who had been in charge of culture and propaganda at the time of the Hundred Flowers Movement. Lu's final thought, on his deathbed in May 1966, as the Cultural Revolution was breaking out, was, "let children go to school . . . Let people speak out what they really think!"¹⁴ In May, the journal carried Zhou Ruijin's reflections on Deng Xiaoping's call for constant innovation in thinking,¹⁵ and in July the journal carried two more controversial articles. One was a harsh critique of the stagnation of political reform since Deng Xiaoping's death, and the other was a moving reminiscence by former vice premier Tian Jiyun of his days in Zhongnanhai. Although he never mentioned Zhao Zyang by name, the article was clearly about the former premier, and even included a picture of him.¹⁶

Also in July, *Yanhuang Chunqiu* published an article by He Fang, an honorary academician at CASS, that strongly supported Xie Tao's article. He said that there had been a great competition in the 20th century between two models of socialism: democratic socialism and the type that tried to transit to communism under the leadership of communist parties. He went on to contrast the economic and social development of Sweden with the failures and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union. As he put it, "the Stalinist model practiced by the Soviet Union took the wrong path from the very beginning." Taking issue with the predominant Chinese interpretation of the fall of the Soviet Union, He Fang writes, "Until today, there are people in China who still persist in their historical idealism, blaming Khrushchev and Gorbachev for the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, according to what I have heard and witnessed, the Soviet people do not think of it in the same way." He quotes an aged veteran of the battle of Leningrad who "sadly expressed his opinion that the Soviet revolution was wrong."¹⁷ This idea that the October Revolution had been fundamentally wrong, and hence, by implication, that

the Chinese revolution was similarly a mistake, has been around at least since 1996, when Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu wrote their book *Farewell to Revolution*, but it seems to be becoming more mainstream in liberal intellectual circles.¹⁸

Where Is the Center?

The most authoritative statement of the Party's position was presented by Hu Jintao to the Central Party School on June 25. Like Jiang Zemin before him, Hu used the Party school as a forum to set out the basic themes of the 17th Party congress. The speech indicated that the drafting of the political report to the congress was complete, or nearly so, and Hu's speech was almost certainly approved in advance by the Politburo Standing Committee—which attended the talk.

From Hu's talk—or at least the excerpts carried by Xinhua—it is apparent that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” will form the overarching theme of the political report. Emphasizing the “sinification” of Marxism both underscores continuity with Deng Xiaoping (and, indeed, Mao Zedong) and allows the CCP to continue to draw on ever more elements of Chinese tradition, including especially Confucianism.

Within this framework, Hu emphasized four “steadfasts” or unchanging elements (*jianding buyi*): Emancipating thought (*jiefang sixiang*), reform and opening up, scientific development and social harmony, and building a comparatively well-off society (*xiakang shehui*). Of these four steadfasts, perhaps the most surprising is the first, emancipating thought. As Hu Shuli, the editor of *Caijing*, said, “‘Emancipating the mind’ is not an ordinary slogan; . . . it refers primarily to the breaking through of the ‘left’ ideological shackles.” Indeed, invocation of such a freighted concept suggests that Hu may be willing to go much further in his second term in tackling the problems China faces than evident from the past five years.¹⁹

In addition, Hu's emphasis on “reform and opening up” continues his re-emphasis on this theme since the NPC meeting in 2006, a time when leftist criticisms of reform (such as criticisms of management buyouts and the proposed property rights law) had reached a peak.²⁰ It suggests, as Professor Yan Shuhan of the Central Party School put it, that Hu's speech was a rejection of opinions that “negate the general direction and achievements of 29 years of reform and opening up,” an apparent reference to New Left criticisms.²¹ Supporting this interpretation was the repeated reference Hu Jintao made in his talk to “scientific development concept,” a term that conveys a less populist tone than his other ideological slogan of building a “harmonious society,” something that now is seen as more of a goal than a call to action. At the same time, Hu firmly rejected recent discussions—such as the one broached by Xie Tao—of democratic socialism. China would firmly uphold, Hu said, the fundamental principles of “scientific socialism.”²²

Having set the parameters of his approach, Hu then outlined further steps for “deepening political structural reform.” It was important, he said, to “actively and appropriately” push forward inner-Party democracy and uphold democratic centralism.

“Democratic consciousness” should be increased within the Party, and inner-Party democracy made increasingly healthy.²³ In short, Hu committed himself to a program of incremental change in the Party to complement the more bureaucratic approach laid out at the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee when it called for enhancing the Party’s governing capabilities.

Conclusion

The calls for expanding grassroots democracy and the leadership’s apparent endorsement of incremental political reform come at a strange time. Over the last year counties and townships have been changing their leading cadres (along with provinces and cities), a perfect opportunity to implement the sort of reform now being discussed. Little information has been released about the procedures actually followed, but bolder experiments with elections of Party secretaries were apparently discouraged and even shut down by higher-level authorities. It will now be another five years before there is another opportunity to experiment with grassroots democracy on a large scale. There are indeed areas in which political reform can be continued—public accountability in the budgetary process, reform of local people’s congresses, the “permanent representative system” (giving delegates to Party congresses greater functions between congresses), expanding “consultative democracy,” etc.—but it appears that the leadership missed a good opportunity to implement inner-Party democracy over the past year.

The difficulty of implementing inner-Party democracy was underscored by a recent commentary from the Central Organization Department. The commentary placed great emphasis on the role of the “number one leader” (*yiba shou*—the Party secretary), saying that such leaders “should earnestly enhance their democratic awareness; take the lead in developing democracy; [and] seriously heed the opinions of all sides.”²⁴ Such admonitions reduce democracy to a leadership style, not a set of institutions that constrain the arbitrary use of power, which is what experiments with grassroots democracy have been trying to do. Better leadership is, no doubt, a good thing. But it is not democracy.

Notes

¹ Hu Jintao, “Speech at the Report Meeting to Study *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*,” Xinhua, 15 August 2006 (translated by Open Source Center [OSC], CPP20060815706009).

² “Hu Jintao, at the 36th Collective Study Session of the CCP Central Political Bureau, Urges to Raise the Level of Socialist Grassroots Democratic Political Building to Ensure the Masses of People at the Grassroots to Directly Exercise Democratic Rights,” Xinhua, 1 December 2006 (translated OSC, CPP20061201004010).

³ Yu Keping, *Zengliang minzhu yushanzhi* [Incremental democracy and good governance], (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2003).

⁴ Yu Keping, “A Few Theoretical Issues Concerning Citizens Participation,” *Xuexi shibao*, 18 December 2006 (translated by OSC, CPP20061226332002).

⁵ Yang Qinglin, “China’s Political Reform Has Reached Another Point of Inflection,” *Ta Kung Pao*, 7 January 2007 (translated by OSC, CPP20070109710011).

- ⁶ Wen Jiabao, “A Number of Issues Regarding the Historic Tasks in the Initial Stage of Socialism and China’s Foreign Policy,” *Xinhua*, 26 February 2007 (translated by OSC, CPP20070226045002).
- ⁷ CCTV, 6 March 2007 (translated by OSC, CPP20070316050001).
- ⁸ Wang Changjiang, “Guanyu minzhu de jidian zairenshi” [Several points of reunderstanding democracy] *Lilun dongtai*, no. 1738 (30 March 2007), pp. 1–11. See also *Beijing ribao*, 21 May 2007, which republished Wang’s article under the title “Bianxi guanyu minzhu wenti de jige yilu” [Analyzing several doubts about democracy].
- ⁹ Wang Changjiang, “Zhengque renshi xuanju” [Correctly understand elections], *Beijing ribao*, 21 September 2006.
- ¹⁰ Wang Changjiang, “Zhengzhong duidai difang he jiceng de minzhu chuangxin” [Seriously treat the democratic innovations of the grassroots and localities], *Zhongguo gongchandang*, June 2007, pp. 87–89. This article was originally published in *Xuexi shibao*, on 19 March 2007.
- ¹¹ Wang Gang, “Wang Changjiang: Xianyou zhidu kuangjia you fazhan minzhu kongjian” [Wang Changjiang: There is room for development within the present system], *Nanfang renwu zhoukan*, 28 June 2007, pp. 42–44.
- ¹² Jiang Xun, “Zhonggong yuanlao zhichi Hu Wen zhenggai” [The elders of Zhongnanhai support the political reform of Hu and Wen], *Yazhou zhoukan*, no. 22 (10 June 2007).
- ¹³ Yang Zhongxun, “Heated Debate on Democracy,” in *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*, 16 July 2007 (translated by OSC, CPP20070813320001).
- ¹⁴ Lu De, “Lu Dingyi wannian de jidian fansi” [Some reflections of Lu Dingyi in his later years], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, no. 4 (April 2007):1–6.
- ¹⁵ Zhou Ruijin, “Jinian Deng Xiaoping: Jianchi linian chuangxin” [Remembering Deng Xiaoping: Maintain innovation in ideas], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, 5 (May):10–19.
- ¹⁶ Wu Min, “Deng Xiaoping de zhengzhi tizhi gaige lantu jiqi shijian” [Deng Xiaoping’s blueprint for political reform and its implementation], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, no. 7 (July 2007): 25–29; and Tia Jiyun “Guowuyuan dayuan de jiyi” [Memories of the great hall in the State Council], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, no. 7 (July 2007):1–5.
- ¹⁷ He Fang, “Wo kan shehui zhuyi” [My views on socialism], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, no. 7 (July 2007): 12–17.
- ¹⁸ Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu. *Gaobie geming* [Farewell to revolution]. Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1996.
- ¹⁹ “Hu Jintao zai zhongyang dangxiao shengbuji ganbu jinxiuban fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Hu Jintao makes an important talk to provincial and bureau level officials studying at the Central Party School], retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/5910868.html>.
- ²⁰ “Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong fenbie canjia shenyi he taolun” [Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Jiang Qinglin, and Zheng Qinghong participate separately in examination and discussion]. *Renmin ribao*, 7 March 2006, p. 1.
- ²¹ “‘6.25 jianghua’ chuandi de xinxi” [Information conveyed by the June 25 (speech)], *Nanfang zhoumo*, 28 June 2007.
- ²² “Hu Jintao zai zhongyang dangxiao shengbuji ganbu jinxiuban fabiao zhongyao jianghua.”
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Zhong Zuwen, “Renzhen guanचे zhexing minzhu jizhongzhi” [Earnestly implement the system of democratic centralism], *Renmin ribao*, 13 September 2007, p. 1. This was the fourth of four (to date) commentaries admonishing the new leaders at the provincial, city, county, and township levels. The others appeared in *Renmin ribao* on 10 August, 11 September, and 12 September.