

How Not to Democratize China

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A new book by Ci Jiwei argues that the Communist Party must lead China's transition to democracy from the top down. But such a process would be a contradiction in terms—and would result in no democracy at all.

Democracy is no stranger to China, but for well over a century it has wandered homeless throughout the length and breadth of the land. Hong Kong-based political philosopher Jiwei Ci joins a long line of Chinese political and thought leaders who have prescribed democracy as a remedy for what ails the Chinese body politic. In 1898, as the Manchu dynasty was collapsing, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao advocated British-style constitutional monarchy as the vehicle for introducing democracy to China. Democracy was one of the three pillars of nationalist revolutionary Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (along with nationalism and people's livelihood). In 1918, Chen Duxiu, a leader of the New Culture Movement, invoked "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" to extricate China from its post-dynastic morass. Even Mao Zedong, ideologically committed to a violent and bloody seizure of power, feigned devotion to democracy in his 1940 screed *New Democracy* aimed against Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, a weak "strongman" bravely resisting Japanese aggression. More recently, the student-led Chinese citizens' movements of spring 1989 valorized democracy as it peacefully urged the calcified leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to undertake meaningful political reform. Chinese democracy is not an oxymoron.

Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis

Ci Jiwei
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Ci's paradoxical and quixotic contribution to this legacy is to call upon party supremo Xi Jinping to take the lead in preparing the Chinese people for an orderly transition to the *simulacrum* rather than the *reality* of a democratic system, in which the CCP would retain its leading position in a highly centralized Chinese state that would guarantee Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity—objectives that Ci, like the CCP, prioritizes. Unless Ci possesses the medieval alchemists' philosopher's stone that was supposed to transform base metals into gold, the notion of transmuting the neo-Maoist authoritarian egotist Xi Jinping into an avatar of democracy is preposterous. One might as well try persuading tigers to become vegans. To be sure, Ci's book is intellectually challenging, erudite, and consistently engaging, but it is a purely cerebral exercise, almost devoid of empirical history, sociology, and real politics. Unfortunately, it contributes little of value to the serious task of contemplating a possible future transition from an authoritarian hybridized "communist" political system to some sort of democratic future for China. Taken as a whole—notwithstanding Ci's intermittently sharp criticism of actually existing "socialism with Chinese characteristics," his pose as a detached philosopher, and his prudential argument in favor of Chinese democracy—he comes across as a soft apologist for an abhorrent regime.

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i's point of departure is what he describes as a looming crisis in political legitimacy for the ruling CCP. As the revolutionary legacy upon which its presumptive right to rule is based fades into oblivion, the party will require a new foundation for its legitimacy. The CCP leaders that follow Xi Jinping, Ci says, will be much weaker than he and unlike him will lack any connection to the revolutionary legacy. (Xi's father was a core member of the first generation of revolutionary leaders headed by Mao Zedong.) Neither performance legitimacy—the Party's success in presiding over decades of rapid economic growth—nor its self-identification with the rise of China as a world power will provide an adequate substitute. Chinese *society* in Ci's view already exhibits a growing equality of social conditions—thus in social if not political terms, China is already a democratic society. The problem for legitimacy is supposedly the lack of “fit” between society and politics, a problem (or “contradiction” in the Maoist sense) that can only be resolved by CCP-supervised democratic preparation of the Chinese people, who should accept the role of responsible, mature citizens in a vaguely democratic system whose political institutions and governing processes Ci deliberately leaves undefined. His only caution is “to avoid the dogma that the only genuine form or method of democracy is the one that prevails in its many variations in contemporary Western democracies. It is especially necessary to do so in order to leave room for due consideration of *China's special need for a strong state with exceptional centripetal force*” (emphasis added).

Here Ci's views are entirely congruent with those of the ruling CCP which deploys “exceptional centripetal force” to maintain control over those of its citizens who dare to think for themselves as well as over Tibet and Xinjiang—all while threatening *de facto* independent Taiwan with coerced integration into the PRC, a prospect the vast majority of Taiwanese understandably reject. Incidentally, it is

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telling that Ci fails even to mention, let alone seriously analyze, Taiwan's successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy as a possible template for China, lest that exercise antagonize CCP bigwigs. By his frequent adulatory references to the CCP's great achievements, Ci apparently seeks to ingratiate himself with the top leaders of the CCP in the manner of Machiavelli addressing Lorenzo de' Medici. Ci's dismissive references to contemporary *Western* democracies ignore the reality of functioning Asian democracies in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and other distinctly non-Western states. Yet his strictures against the hegemony of neo-liberalism and capitalist dominion in Western democracies are pertinent to a potentially democratic China where the

party-state already collaborates with China's ultra-wealthy and politically well-connected capitalists. In addition to his silence regarding Taiwan's democratic transition, Ci has nothing to say about the post-communist transitions in Russia and East and Central Europe. Such ground facts are invisible or irrelevant from the heights at which he operates.

I can address only a few of the numerous problems with Ci's scenario for a partial transition to democracy. First is the notion that the CCP's right-to-rule rests upon "communist teleological-revolutionary legitimacy." In fact, the CCP came to power not through a popular revolution, but through a civil war following a debilitating eight year war of resistance to Japanese aggression, from 1937 to 1945. While Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist government and armies bore the brunt of the fighting, the Chinese communists opportunistically took advantage of the conflict to expand their own territory and armed forces, acting like a parasite infecting a weakened body. Communist revolutionary legitimacy rests upon an historical myth that Ci does not challenge. Ci's distance from political as opposed to political-philosophical discourse is demonstrated by his failure to examine actual power relations. Nor does he analyze the political role of classes, social groups, ethnicities, religions, regional interests, or anything concrete that actually operate in politics.

A second dubious contention central to his prudential case for democracy is that contemporary Chinese *society* is already substantially democratic in the sense that Tocqueville, whom Ci frequently cites along with Althusser, Gramsci, Kant, and others, discerned in his classic *Democracy in America*. The lack of a formal, legally prescribed social hierarchy in Chinese society, however, is hardly tantamount to even a rough equality of social conditions. Chinese society is marked by vast inequalities of wealth, a yawning gap between urban and rural, marginalized and oppressed ethnicities (primarily Tibetans and Uighurs), and above all the existence of a privileged caste of communist cadres and their families that enjoys power and privileges denied to the hoi polloi. Thus Ci's prudential argument for democracy based on the need for "fittingness"—aligning political reality with social reality—collapses.

Third, even were one to accept the myth of communist revolutionary legitimacy, there is no reason to accept Ci's *ex cathedra* assertion that the passing of the first and second generation revolutionaries and their progeny necessitates a new foundation for legitimacy that only the simulacrum of democracy—for that is all he offers—can provide. Just as the myth of the inexhaustible wisdom of the Founding Fathers of the United States helps sustain American democracy, even in its current "eviscerated" form (as Ci calls it), so the myth of the PRC's founding fathers, suitably nurtured and burnished by the CCP propaganda organs—the Ideological State Apparatuses, to use Althusser's term that Ci borrows—can arguably sustain the PRC when combined with ample servings of hyper-nationalism, pride in China's global power status, and at least adequate economic performance. That the Communist Party no longer believes in or aspires to anything resembling what communism used to entail matters far less than Ci supposes. The moral vacuum that reigns in contemporary China and breeds corruption, chicanery, and outright fraud may actually advantage the CCP. The Party is a political organization whose protean character, ideological elasticity, and control of the levers of hard and soft power may suffice to prolong its grip on power in what is at root a quasi-bourgeois, consumerist society where political opposition is ruthlessly suppressed.

In his discussion of politics in the Special Administration Region of Hong Kong, Ci dismisses the democratic aspirations of large numbers of Hong Kongers as merely a manifestation of their irrational desire to maintain a sense of apartness from mainland Chinese citizens, as a matter of identity politics and pretensions to cultural superiority. His is the perspective of an unsympathetic and supercilious academic mandarin who

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believes that democracy in Hong Kong is impossible because sovereignty inheres in China and Hong Kongers must know and accept their subordinate place. Despite his lip service to the value of citizens' moral and political agency and his proclamation that the Chinese Dream cannot be fulfilled without democracy, Ci consistently privileges acquiescence and obedience to constituted authority in order to preserve stability and order over the freedoms and uncertainties of democratic political systems. His concept of democracy is pallid and anemic. He views the political world in antinomies, as comprising stark and unbridgeable contradictions with no possibility of compromise. Ci's straitjacketed logic is impeccable; his politics are purblind.

Finally, we must confront the fact that Ci does not discuss any alternative paths toward democracy in China in which the Communist Party does not lead the way. Like the CCP leaders who rule the nation in the name of the people, Ci perceives the people not as a pillar of democracy but as a potential mob threatening to loose anarchy and mayhem (*luan*, meaning disorder or chaos) upon the land unless their political aspirations are properly channeled by their betters. This is a well-worn idea and not without foundation. A century ago, Sun Yat-sen posited a lengthy but undefined period of political tutelage during which his Nationalist Party would exercise unilateral power in the interests of the nation and the people while they were educated and domesticated into becoming responsible citizens of the republic. But who would decide when that point had arrived?

Ci's vision for China is of democracy deferred, deferred until such time as the Chinese people, after a period of democratic preparation initiated and supervised by the Chinese Communist Party—a party that to its marrow is hostile to democracy—pronounces that China is now ready for a democratic transition. Yet anything other than a sham democracy would threaten the CCP's monopoly of power, as democratic transitions did to ruling communist parties elsewhere, if not in the short term than soon thereafter. Ci speaks of China's "urgent need for democracy" not because of the intrinsic value of democracy (which he doubts), but because he is convinced that the legitimacy democracy will confer will best secure stability and order for a unitary and centrally controlled China. Like Confucius, the peripatetic teacher who sought in vain for a ruler who would implement his teachings rooted in humaneness and virtue, Ci appeals to Xi Jinping, who, if he follows Ci's advice and leads China toward the promised land of democracy, would be "justly remembered as the most admirable One in CCP history."

But that is not how Chinese modern history has worked. Rather it has been marked by civil and foreign wars, mass conflicts and tragedies, and sharp changes of direction, not by orderly and measured progress. The last word belongs to Hu Shih (1891-1962), the liberal philosopher who said, “the only way to have democracy is to have democracy.”

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