

POLITICAL STRUCTURAL REFORM AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHINA

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In May of 1989, Westerners watched with fascination as Tiananmen Square in Beijing became home to a prodemocracy student demonstration at the very heart of the capital of the People's Republic of China. Though the Chinese government had made an effort to liberalize certain of its policies in the late 1980's, this massive expression of protest appeared to epitomize several years of popular movement toward greater democratization in that country. However, Western fascination turned to horror when, on June 3-4, units of the Chinese People's Army occupied Tiananmen, crushing the demonstration and killing hundreds, maybe thousands, of student protestors.

Notwithstanding this brutal suppression, the Chinese people and government still face key questions—specifically, whether or not the prodemocracy genie, once let out, can or should be put back into the bottle. Professor Gao Xian of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences addressed some of these questions during a lecture sponsored by the *Journal of Legislation*, given at the Notre Dame Law School on December 1, 1988. The following essay was adapted from Professor Gao's talks. While its author could not speculate as to the future of popular movements such as Tiananmen, or to their fate, the editors believe his observations remain relevant to any discussion of China's political and economic future.

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INTRODUCTION

Democratization is an important political trend in many socialist countries today. The People's Republic of China also faces, in the course of its present reform and development, a political structural reform with democratization as its focus. The overall purpose of China's reforms, open policies and modernization, is the integrated development of the entire society. This not only includes the modernization of the economy, but also the modernization of politics, culture and of its citizens views. But political structural reform is the important precondition and guarantee for these other reforms.

This essay is divided into three parts. Part I will examine general ideas of China's political structural reform. This part will contain a partial digest of official arguments and mainstream ideas about the current reforms. Part II contains several comments on these reformist ideas. Finally, Part III of this essay will look at a few points of comparison between reforms in China and those now taking place in the Soviet Union. These three parts are not of equal length.

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The first is the most important, as it provides grounding for thinking about the current political reforms going on in China. The second part is the writer's personal view. And the third part, although it is important and interesting, will touch upon its topic only briefly, as a firmer conclusion would require further research and explication beyond the scope of this essay.

PART I: GENERAL IDEAS OF CHINA'S POLITICAL STRUCTURAL REFORM

A. The Process of Political Structural Reform in China

China's need to transform all of its productive relations and economic structures which are still incompatible with the development of productive forces was first pointed out by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1978, by the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP. This session, in its bulletin, also called for the economic reform of all inadequate ways of management, action and thinking. In August 1980, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that defects in the current leadership and cadre systems of both the Party and the government had close links to the highly centralized system which had existed since the founding of the People's Republic. Recently, the CCP revised its leadership setup, establishing a Secretariat to strengthen the Party's collective leadership. The new Constitution adopted in 1982 promoted the division of work between the Party and the government, stipulated a term of years to replace the life term of office for heads of state and established an "individual responsibility system" for the administrative heads of various governmental levels. At the same time, China's statutory legal framework was strengthened. These all-important measures will help dilute the age-old concentration of power in China. The Thirteenth Party Congress of October 1987 systematically put forth the programs, contents and targets of political structural reform to set the overall political reform in motion.

B. Defects of the Existing Political Structure

The main defects of China's political structure include overconcentration of power, serious bureaucraticism, remnant feudalism and other related problems.

Overconcentration of Power. China's existing political structure has felt the impact of the Soviet model, but it also bears the imprint of traditional Chinese political institutions. It is closely bound up with China's old traditional ideas and with the belief that a socialist country should adopt an administrative structure with a high concentration of power in the hands of a central leadership. High concentration of power remains the fundamental characteristic of the current political structure in China.

Confusion of Functions Between the Party and Government. Owing to historical reasons, Party organizations at different levels have, for a long period of time, usurped the functions of legislation, jurisdiction and administration of the state and the government.

Defects in the Organizational Setup and the Personnel System. This problem closely relates to overconcentration of power. Influenced as they are by ancient ideas of a very traditional culture, most Chinese citizens lack any conception of decentralization. They tend to think that the higher the position, the better the

ability of the officeholder to make decisions for his or her subordinates. Therefore, a clearcut division of responsibility and authority was often missing among different bureaucratic levels and among different organizations or different posts. Since power was overcentralized, local initiatives could not be fully unleashed.

Overconcentration of power in the hands of the leadership and defects in the personnel system have dampened the initiative of the rank and file government staff. Generally, government officials have had a rigid set of rules to follow and have been unable to treat issues in an independent and responsible way. As a result, they have been kept busy all the time submitting reports and asking for directives. There was also the above mentioned problem of "permanent positions."

Blurring the Lines Between Government Functions and Enterprise Activities. Under the old ways, ostensibly private enterprises and many different social organizations became virtual annexes to government organs. Many affairs which should have been the responsibility of private enterprises and social organizations grew to be monopolized by the central government or by local governments. Traditionally, people tended to agree that the rule of government was limitless. This attitude has directly affected the smooth implementation of economic structural reform.

C. The Necessity of Political Structural Reform

A socialist society needs further perfection. China's present overcentralized political structure tends to monopolize just about everything: politics, economics, culture, judicial functions and so on. China, a country with a long history of feudalism, established the current political system on the basis of traditional theses, as well as on Soviet models and on wartime practices during the years prior to liberation. Overcentralization of power in political structures barred the way of progress in the reform of economic and other structures. It also stifled the initiative and creativity of various political, economic and cultural organizations. This is why it is imperative to carry out political structural reform.

Such a corresponding transformation of Chinese political structures will also be necessary if China is to develop a commodity-based economy. A commodity economy needs autonomous management, equal exchange, free choice, free competition, attention to economic results, innovations and so forth. All these require a political environment conducive to conditions of equality, freedom and democracy. They require a transformation of traditional ideas and a reformation of administrative structures, especially those of the government, so that indirect control and administration may replace direct control and administration. These conditions will be necessary to unleash the initiative of private enterprise.

In a socialist nation such as China, political structural reform demands democratized management of state affairs. The cause of socialism will make rapid progress only with the active participation of millions of ordinary people in state affairs and in economic and social management. Although the process of democratization differs in the various socialist countries, progress towards democracy is their common trend. China too, is trying to gradually realize the goal of democratization through political structural reform.

Political structural reform will also require the scientific and legalized management of state affairs. As with economic monopoly, political monopoly inev-

itably evolves towards corruption and dictatorship. This has been proven by the history of many countries, including China. Several major defects in China's political structure need to be reformed; they involve the following aspects:

First, China must recognize that a system of checks and balances is the most efficient and reasonable relationship of power among different state organs. When the legislative, administrative and judicial power of a country is concentrated in one person or one organization, direct or disguised dictatorship will emerge, and the democracy and freedom of the people cannot be secured. Therefore, the principle of balance and check is not only applicable to capitalist countries, but also to socialist countries.

Second, state organizations should follow the principle of unity of obligations, rights and responsibilities in their organizational and administrative work. Violation of this principle, as is currently the case, causes overconcentration of power in top leadership. It leaves organizations and functionaries at lower levels with no power to make independent decisions. It hampers their initiative and discourages efficiency.

Third, socialist countries should follow the rule of law. Democratic politics must be the politics of law, and law in a socialist country should represent the will of the people. Violation of this principle—the practice of any kind of individual rule—will inevitably lead to dictatorship and authoritarianism.

D. Democratization: The Central Target of Political Reform

The long-range target of China's reform is to establish an efficient, socialist political structure with a high degree of democracy and an adequate legal system. The concrete contents of China's political reform consist of the following points:

Democratization of Politics. China must guarantee its citizens popular participation in government, popular management, popular supervision, popular check-ups and popular decisionmaking, all with full civil rights. The people's congress should remain the fundamental political unit of China. However, it is important to establish closer ties between people's congresses of different levels and the masses in order that the people's congresses can better act on behalf of those they represent, and under their closer supervision. Democratic elections must be facilitated, and the electoral system must be better organized. Democratization of politics also requires a reasonable division of power among various state organs and political organizations, so as to guarantee their democratic and efficient operation.

Openness of Politics. Without openness in politics, people will be unable to participate in or to supervise politics. State organs should establish a system to report to the people periodically. People's deputies should report to and consult with their constituencies. Newspapers, radios and television should have the right to disclose all violations of the Chinese Constitution or of other laws, and similar abuses of power. Openness of politics helps guarantee social supervision and guards against political mistakes by government officials of different levels.

Scientific Decisionmaking. Unscientific decisionmaking, such as decisionmaking on the basis of an individual leader's personal experience, must be resolutely overcome. In order to guarantee scientific decisionmaking, China should strengthen its institutions of information, consultation and supervision. As a

foundation, these institutions should rely upon existing decisionmaking and decision-implementing organs.

Legal Rules in Political Operations. Democratic politics must be politics of the "rule of law." The rule of individual leaders' directives, the rule of slogans or the rule of political campaigns should never be allowed. Only dictators fail to tolerate legal regulation and believe in the rule of man over the rule of law. It must be recognized that state organs, political organizations and leading cadres have no rights beyond the Constitution and laws.

Institutionalization of Supervision. One of the serious lessons of China's political life has been in the feebleness of its supervising organs. Their lack of power in the past created an environment in which serious errors in decision-making could not be corrected or diverged from before the death of the decisionmaker. This was a source of deep calamity for the Chinese state and its people. Only when the organs of supervision have the power to operate without interference from various other directions can they act independently and effectively.

E. Separating the Functions of Party and Government as the Central Link in Political Reform

Leadership of the CCP in China's political life has been the result of the nation's past one hundred years of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal history. Furthermore, the Party remains the core of China's socialist construction. This is the reality. But, for a long time, there has been a serious problem of confusion over the division of functions between the Party and the government. Since the late 1950's, China has emphasized the unification of Party leadership with that of governmental enterprises and institutions. Many Chinese even regard this as a criterion for supporting the leadership of the Party. This system grew stronger with every political movement. As a result, Party committees have come to monopolize many administrative affairs. Bulky Party organs and large numbers of full-time cadres must be maintained accordingly.

Therefore, political structural reform cannot start unless China first resolves the confusion of functions between the Party and the government; especially the usurpation of the latter's responsibilities by the former. In such a situation, the autonomous exercise of authority by the government, by people's congresses and by judicial organs has been seriously obstructed. Separation of functions between the Party and government means that activities of the Party should be confined within the limit of the Constitution and the laws. The leadership of the party in power should mainly give guidance in policies and principles; it should guarantee and supervise professional affairs; it should engage in political and ideological work and it should set good examples in all aspects of life and work.

Of course, the confusion of responsibility between the CCP and the government has its historical conditions and its historical background. The system was developed during the revolutionary war years and was subsequently strengthened in repeated political campaigns. It was adaptable to the model of mandatory planning.

Now the situation is different. The modernization of development demands the initiative of various institutions and sources. It also requires the operation of various organizations. The practices of the war years cannot meet the needs

of the current years of peaceful construction. The ways of mass movement cannot meet the needs of a modern nation. The institution of high centralization cannot meet the needs of a commodity economy. These conditions have been dictated by historical conditions and by the requirements of reform.

Just as with the development of a socialist commodity economy, the political reform of socialist democratic politics will be an evolutionary process of gradual accumulation. China's modernization confronts complicated social contradictions. It needs a stable socio-political environment. Therefore, a "large democracy" which may damage the legal system of the state or destabilize the society should be discouraged.

F. Political Structural Reform and Transformation of Ideas

China is a country with over two thousand years of feudal autocratic tradition and authoritarian experience. The characteristics of China's political culture greatly emphasized the rule of man over the rule of law. Traditional political philosophy stressed the rule of "good emperors and wise dukes," the politics of "the honest and upright statesman" and "seeking exoneration and justice from good officials." Such traditional political philosophy pinned hopes of good government purely on the personal integrity and moral persuasion of those who ruled. Such political ideas and ways of thinking still exist. Even after the Revolution, many people cherished hope for solutions to social and economic problems in "good cadres" and "upright leaders" rather than in institutional and structural reforms. To overcome such unhealthy tendencies as favoritism, nepotism, jobbery and backdoorism, China's leaders sought more to raise personal levels of consciousness and to appeal to individual leaders' consciences than to improve China's political institutions.

Political reform goes hand in hand with the elimination of remnant feudal influences in ideology and politics. Long after liberation, remnants of feudal influences still exist in various aspects of Chinese society. As Deng pointed out in his 1980 work, *Reform of the Leadership System of the Party and the State*, all abuses in the political life of China and the CCP have much to do with feudal influences on Chinese history. Therefore, now is the time to firmly overcome remnant feudalism, through a series of institutional reforms. Otherwise, Deng notes, the state and the people will suffer losses. Unhealthy tendencies which emerged in recent years—such as the pursuit of personal gain through one's position and authority—have, in the main, strong feudal tints.

Remnant feudal influences also form the major obstacle to China's transformation from the rule of man to the rule of law. If feudal ideas like "power first and law second" and "power counts more than law" are not wiped out, democracy will be just an empty slogan.

PART II: SOME COMMENTS

Political structural reform in China will be quite a tough job. Taking into consideration China's long history of feudalism as well as its turbulent history since 1949, the process of political reform will not be smooth sailing. As noted above, official ideas recognize democratization as the central link of political structural reform. In general, this is undoubtedly the correct approach. But to pursue this a step further, it should be noted that the key point of democratization

may be to reform the Party itself. This reformation raises tricky questions. The following points stand out.

First, conceptually, observers should recognize the *de facto* existence of plural interests in socialist China. There is no so-called “monism of interest”—no political, economic or moral conformity of the whole country—as China’s leaders repeatedly claimed in the past. Vertically, there exist the different interests of the state, of society at large, of different regions, enterprises, collectives and individuals. Horizontally, there are different interests among different social strata and social groups, as well as among localities, professions and so on. It is important to recognize that various interest groups exist in socialist society. Reformers should pay attention to coordinating them.

Second, the long-term direction of political reform in China should be towards political pluralism. The idea of a monist, absolute, infallible Party leadership must be discarded, otherwise genuine democratization cannot be achieved. Of course, one should adopt a realistic attitude towards the leading role of the CCP in China. On one hand, one must understand the historical experience which forms the foundation of today’s reality. On the other hand, the long-term target of any political reform in China must be political pluralism if the reform is to activate all positive factors of the society for a prosperous and desirable development of the whole country. Of course, this takes time.

But, even though for the time being China’s one-party leadership seems unlikely to change, something can still be done in this direction. Possibilities include the strengthening of inner-party democracy in the CCP, strengthening extra-party supervision over the CCP, strengthening roles played by democratic parties and mass organizations and so on. The reform of the Party should include both the reform of its theory and of its practices.

Since the start of the present reform in China, there have been several positive developments in this respect. For example, the godlike image and infallibility of Mao Zedong has been discarded. Also, reformers have returned to the principles of seeking truth from objective facts and of taking practice as the sole criterion of utility. The Party has recognized that theories of Marxism and socialism are to be renewed and further developed but that those theories’ utopian theses—which were formulated by the Party’s predecessors within the limits of their historical conditions—are to be discarded. Dogmatic interpretations of Marxism and the erroneous viewpoints imposed on it are finally being rejected.

The Party has also recognized that China is in the primary stage of socialism, and that the central task of such a socialist society should be the expansion of productive forces. The slogan, “class struggle is the central link” is seeing less currency.

The Party has achieved some improvements in inner-party democracy (the election system, for instance) and openness (journalists are now allowed to attend and report on Party congresses). The Party has articulated some promising new principles in the Party-government relationship, like the separation of functions between the Party and government and the role of Party operations under the new Constitution.

Finally, the official treatment of dissidents, who were formerly suppressed politically or punished, has grown somewhat better than in the past. They now have a chance to express their views or publish some of their writings. After

having been forced out of their original positions, these people are being restored to suitable employment. Some of them have been allowed to visit abroad and to make professional tours.

But there is still a long way to go. When the Party won its nationwide victory in 1949, it was not well prepared ideologically or theoretically to make the drastic change of status to that of a party in power. Although Mao rightly raised this point on the eve of 1949, the Party, including Mao himself, did not pay serious attention to it as a practical matter. The power and privilege of the Party grew inflated; Mao's "cult of personality" became stronger and stronger. Party rectification campaigns solved few problems.

The mentality ascribing infallibility to the Party and to its top leaders created an attitude of intolerance towards criticism or different viewpoints. This fatal error has led to a divorce between the Party and the masses. Party campaigns against bourgeois rightists exemplify this. The situation has changed very little. Despite all its rhetoric and statements, the Party still clings to the image of a flawless leadership. The Party did make certain self-criticisms after the fall of the "Gang of Four," but one of the impressions this was intended to create was that the Party was strong enough to discover and correct its own mistakes, even one as big as the Cultural Revolution. Party suppression of "dissidents," "aliens" and sharp critics of its policies, lines and practices drove many good people out of its own camp. The struggle against "spiritual pollution" and the fight against "liberalism" only helped to deepen the so-called "conviction crisis" and "confidence crisis" in China and led to the Party's loss of popularity and credibility among the people.

The principles of reform raised above still need a great effort to put them in practice. The "rule of man" has not nearly been fundamentally reversed.

The Institutional Perspective

In *Toward an Institutional Analysis of State Socialism*, David Stark and Victor Nee make an in-depth analysis of the processes and theories of reform in socialist countries. They conclude that new institutional reforms of state socialism are incompatible with earlier traditional theories of totalitarianism and modernization. Their argument assumes that state socialism represents a distinctive social formation that has its own institutional logic and dynamics of development. This logic is not derived from capitalist development. Socialism is seen neither as capitalism's polar opposite nor its inevitable convergent future.

The new institutional perspective insists first that theories explaining processes and outcomes in state socialism must take into account the institutional arrangements specific to state socialism. Second, rather than exclusively focusing on party and state elites, this perspective opens up socialist societies and economies, and their respective relationships to the official organs of the state, as areas of research. Thus, such important topics as subordinate social groups, popular culture, social networks, consumer markets, entrepreneurship, organizational innovations, political coalitions, local administration and new forms of political representation all become objects of study.

This methodology is undoubtedly correct. Nonetheless, no matter what form the course of study may take, it is still advisable to keep in mind that reform of the Party is the key to overall reform of a socialist country. This is especially

true for China, because the Party is in a position of absolute leadership.

In fact, Stark and Nee quote Susan Shirk's conclusion that it is precisely the concentration of power in a few top leaders—who set the reform agenda, shape "reformist" ideology and manage conflicts in subordinate agencies—that provides the tools to implement change. Far from being an obstacle, such state leadership can be the instrument of reform. Shirk gave the examples of East Asia—Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and, to a more limited extent, Japan—where market economies have thrived in states governed by a single dominant political party. If China remains a one-party state, which it is likely to do, and succeeds in creating an economy that relies on a mix of market and state coordination, it will not be the first East Asian country to have done so.

Although these nations present current phenomena of successful development, there remains another, deeper question: If these surprisingly successful economies enjoyed democratic modes of government and pluralist politics with greater popular support, would they not have also enjoyed healthier political, economic and social development, more harmonious popular moods and a more stable social order, as well as a more equitable distribution of income? After all, the rapid development of the East Asian economies has been the result of various combined factors. One should not give all the credit to single-party rule. If this kind of political system is favorable, why then all the calls and activism for democratization and pluralist politics in these societies? Why, for instance, has the mass struggle for democracy against the South Korean dictatorship repeatedly caused political and economic losses, social turbulence and the deaths of many innocent Korean citizens?

In China at present there are no symptoms nor any real possibilities of a change from one-party rule. Still, one can only hope that efforts in this direction will not disappear. In November 1988, Premier Zhao Zhiyang noted that the current political structural reform aims to build up socialist democracy, but that in the course of reform, the position of the CCP as ruling party will remain unchanged. He added, however, that the Party's way of ruling will be changed. He further added that China will soon begin to institute a system of multiparty cooperation and consultation under the CCP's leadership, and he recommended that China strive to improve and strengthen this system, since China's political system needs not only multiparty cooperation but also unified supervision.

Maybe this is how far political reform in China can be carried out in the foreseeable future.

III. A FEW POINTS OF COMPARISON BETWEEN REFORMS IN CHINA AND IN THE SOVIET UNION

In comparing China and the Soviet Union, it is necessary to note certain links between reform processes of socialist countries in general. It is also necessary to probe the links between political and economic reforms.

The Reforms of the 1950's

Since the early 1950's, there have been several waves of reform in the socialist world. Reform first centered on Nikita Khrushchev's criticism of the personality cult of Joseph Stalin, and the subsequent process of "de-Stalinization." Khrushchev also had some new ideas concerning international communist movements

and the international situation in general. In some countries, de-Stalinization played a positive role in improving the leadership of the Party and in correcting policy errors.

China did not draw enough lessons from the failures of Stalin's cult. And, in any event, Khrushchev's reforms bore the characteristics of impetuosity and rashness. Analytically, they failed to trace and counteract the historical and institutional roots of Stalinism. Old political and economic institutions, as well as the ideology they represented, remained unchanged by the so-called reform. Instead, Khrushchev tried to guide economic construction with leftist slogans such as, "speeding up the march towards Communism." His reform movement ended in failure.

The Sixties

Reform in the 1960's started in mid-decade in the Soviet Union and in eastern European countries. It centered on the transformation of economic structures. During this time China was engulfed in the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, the gap between the reformist steps of China and eastern Europe grew wider.

Reforms in eastern Europe did differ from country to country. For example, the Soviet Union confined its reform to improving some of its conventional institutions, such as targets of planning and material incentives. Near the end of the 1960's, however, in the face of pressures from different directions, the Soviets had to abandon these reforms. Yugoslavia began its reform much earlier, and concentrated on changing market mechanisms. It opened its economy to the world, suspended mandatory planning and began to practise full autonomy of private enterprise. Hungary's 1968 reforms replaced mandatory planning with the expansion of the autonomy of enterprises. This strengthened the role of the market, while at the same time the state still played the part of macroeconomic guide. Of course, the most liberal reforms—those of the "Czech Spring" of 1968—were suppressed by the invasion of Soviet tanks.

The Seventies and Eighties

Since the end of the 1970's, reforms in socialist countries have actively begun to unfold. Both China and the Soviet Union have carried on major fundamental reforms. Despite differences in timing and in basic starting conditions, they have common characteristics: the extension from partial experiment to overall reform, the emphasis on thoroughgoing economic reform, the introduction of political reform as a major step and the inevitable interference from latent feudalism and rigid dogmatism.

But there have been many differences. First, reform in the U.S.S.R. started from the top. Concrete measures lag behind the structural reshuffle, and it seems that the rank and file cannot keep up with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's call to reform. In China, on the other hand, structural reform lags behind the concrete measures. More particularly, reform lags behind the demands of the people to raise living standards.

Second, central planning institutions in the Soviet Union have deep roots and are very rigid; this makes the introduction of market mechanisms more difficult than in China. Furthermore, Gorbachev faces big resistance to his reform

efforts from the Soviet Communist Party and from government bureaucrats as well as from the beneficiaries of vested interests. Relatively speaking, planning control in China was somewhat less tight than in the Soviet Union. For instance, township enterprises and private commerce had greater prevalence, whether legal or not.

Reform in China therefore enjoys a firmer foundation, as well as a more positive response from the Chinese people. The economy took off immediately after reform policies were declared. Improvements in people's livelihoods, the introduction of market mechanisms and the condition of market supply all seem to be advancing more quickly than in the Soviet Union. As Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng noted at a press conference in Canberra last November, the Soviet reforms, just as the Chinese reforms, will meet difficulties while proceeding, but Soviet difficulties might be bigger than those faced by the Chinese.

Finally, however, the demographic condition and population quality of the Soviet Union are more favorable than China's. The rural population in the Soviet Union is thirty percent of its total population; that of China is eighty percent. The educational level of the Soviet people is higher than that of China's citizens. In the Soviet Union, there is relatively less egalitarianism in the wage system, but there is no phenomenon of distorted remuneration between mental work and manual work. Nevertheless, in the Soviet Union intellectuals enjoy better rewards in general than their Chinese counterparts.

Still, for both nations, the main question remains the same. Where will the new reforms take them and their people as socialism approaches its second century?

