Is Taiwan a Model for China’s Democratization?

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Introduction

In studying democratization in China, Taiwan seems to be a natural point of reference. For one thing, both China and Taiwan are societies with strong Confucian legacy. Thus, given the similarity in cultural background, if something occurs to Taiwan, it is not unreasonable to presume that it may come to China, too. Moreover, Taiwan since the early 1960s and China after the launch of the economic reform in the late 1970s have been doing remarkably well economically. And after years of economic development, Taiwan finally embarked on the path to transition to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. So, an interesting question is: After decades of almost incessant rapid growth, will China follow in Taiwan’s footsteps by becoming democratic as well? That is, will today’s Taiwan be China’s tomorrow in terms of democratic transition?

These are intriguing questions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the prospect of democracy in China given what we have witnessed in Taiwan. The next section will set up a game-theoretical model of democratization. It will then be followed by a section on democratization in Taiwan. The following section will examine the case of China given the argument in the previous discussions. The final section concludes.

Democratization
Democratization is a process. It may start with liberalization in the authoritarian regime, and then, at some point, transition to democracy occurs. And of course, after democratic transition, there is no guarantee that it will last long. A military coup, for instance, may take place, toppling the newly established democratic regime.

To a certain extent, the factors (e.g., a vibrant civil society) contributing to liberalization, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation are similar, but in different phases, the players may change, and the dynamics may be dissimilar. In the liberalization and democratic transition phases, for example, it is the contestation between the authoritarian regime and the opposition which attempts to push the government to open up the political space; thus, the relative strength between those in power and those in opposition becomes crucial in determining the success or failure of the efforts while in the democratic consolidation phase, a democratic government has been established, and the performance of the new regime may significantly affect the survival of the new regime. Since this paper is concerned about the prospect of democracy in China given the experiences of Taiwan, the focus will be on liberalization and democratic transition, particularly the latter.

In general, democratic transition can be seen as a bargaining process between those in power and those in opposition. And more often than not, the governing elites control a lot of resources, and would like to maintain the governing power, but at a certain point, a democratic opposition may arise, demanding power-sharing or initiating a regime change. The process can be further thought of as being composed of several stages. First, there is the preference formation stage, that is, it must be the case that a lot of people in the society prefer democracy to authoritarian rule. Second, those who are in favor of democracy must be able to come together
to pursue the common goal. That is to say, they have to solve the collective action problem so that a strong democracy movement can be formed to pressure the government to make changes. Third, once the democracy movement can be brought into being, pressure can be put on the governing elite, and we are entering the negotiation process between those in power and those in opposition. At this juncture, the relative strength between the two becomes critical. If the authoritarian government is all-powerful, it may successfully crack down on the opposition, and the democracy movement will fail. Yet, if the government is weak, then it may be forced to make concessions—or even be replaced—thus paving the way for democratic transition. Or if the strength of the authoritarian government and the opposition is on a par with each other, a stalemate may linger on for some time, and the future is uncertain, other things being equal.

Let us start with the preference formation stage. Clearly, people should learn about democracy and appreciate its value before they would choose democracy as a regime type they are in favor of (Dahl 1971). Intuitively, one source of the formation of such preferences is culture which refers to the modal behavioral tendencies of the people in a society. As argued by Samuel Huntington (1991), Islamic and Confucian cultures are inimical to democratization. Whether it is true requires, of course, detailed empirical investigation.

Another source is instrumental. As hypothesized by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2006), the poor prefer redistribution, and would like—sometimes joined by the middle class—to ask for democracy to make sure that the government’s commitment for redistribution is credible.¹ In a different vein, Ben Ansell and David Samuels (2014) argue that it is not the poor, but the bourgeoisie—sometimes joined by the masses—who would support democracy to prevent the expropriation by the government—reminiscent of Barrington Moore’s

¹ For an argument along a similar line but reaching a divergent conclusion, see Boix (2003).
famous dictum, “no bourgeoisie, no democracy.” Thus, the reason that the opposition calls for democracy hinges on the interests they would like to advance or to protect.

Indeed, interests as a source for the support of democracy have attracted a lot of attention in the literature; however, it should be noted that they should not be limited only to economic interests. Political power, for one thing, is cherished by a lot of contenders in the political games for its own sake. It may have something to do with economic interests, but it may not. In the study of, say, electoral politics, it is often assumed that political actors vie for political power, but in the literature on democratic transition, it is often subsumed under other values. In this article, I will assume that interests, economic or not, are all likely objectives for political players in the democratization game.

So, in the following discussion, I will start with preference formation, digging into the sources of the preferences in the cases under study. I will also rely upon survey data to show the preferences people hold in regard to democracy on the ground. One caveat: researchers oftentimes take at face value the responses to a survey question about the degree of support for democracy. This is actually very misleading. Conceivably, an individual may, in principle, support the notion of democracy, but when it comes to a tradeoff between democracy and another valuable thing (e.g., economic development), he or she may turn away from democracy. Consequently, a more appropriate approach to gauging the degree of support for democracy is to check how respondents would react to a question about such tradeoffs. That is, to treat democracy as a valence issue will not tell us much unless we also know whether people would stick to democracy when they have to make a tradeoff between democracy and other values.

Next, if enough people feel that democracy is not only a good thing but also something worthwhile pursuing as against other competing values, a democracy movement may arise.
(This is not to rule out the possibility that some people within the authoritarian regime may be sympathetic toward the ideal of democracy as well, but in general, the incumbent elites may prefer to hold on to power, if possible.) Nonetheless, for a strong democracy movement to be formed, one important obstacle, namely, the collective action problem, needs to be overcome (Olson 1965). That is, those who support democracy may feel that as long as others contribute to the promotion of democracy so as to bring about democratic transition, they will benefit from the regime change no matter whether they themselves make a contribution to the efforts or not. They may thus try to free ride. If many people think the same way, few would contribute, and as a consequence, it is difficult for a strong democracy movement to emerge, and the authoritarian rule may continue.

So, how to solve the collective action problem for a large group of people so that enough of them will be engaged in pursuing the common cause? In accordance with Mancur Olson’s (1965) argument, for the collective action involving a large group of people to succeed, the provision of selective incentives which are targeted only at those who contribute is an important way to move forward. These may be material, solidary, or any other possible types of incentives. One example is the closed shops in the union movement (Olson 1965).

Borrowing from William Riker and Peter Ordeshook’s (1968) well-known calculus of voting participation:

\[ R = PB - C + D, \]

where \( R \) refers to decision to participate, \( B \) the common interest, \( P \) the probability of affecting the provision of the common interest, \( C \) the cost of participation, and \( D \) the utilities from participation itself, it can be seen that since \( P \) is infinitesimal for an individual in a very large group (say, the whole electorate), \( PB \) is virtually negligible even if \( B \)—the difference between
the winning of one’s favorite candidate as against the victory of another candidate—may be significant. Thus, a small $C$ (e.g., going to the polling booth) may outweigh $PB$, so that a voter may decide not to participate unless a selective incentive type of benefit like a sense of civic duty may override the negative calculus based solely on the $PB$ and $C$ terms (Riker and Ordeshook 1968).

The calculus of participating in a democracy movement is somewhat similar. Basically, an individual’s participation may not determine the success or failure of the movement, and in this instance, the cost may actually be a lot higher than going to the polling booth. Thus, by the Olsonian logic, it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to launch a successful democracy movement unless some selective incentives are provided.

Riker and Ordeshook’s (1968) $D$ term includes a sense of civic duty, which can be seen as a kind of selective incentive since an individual will not be able to “enjoy” such a benefit unless he or she participates. In a similar vein, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) talks about the use of ideology as a means of solving the collective action problem by the poor so as to launch a revolution to push for regime change. It functions in a similar fashion as a sense of civic duty in voting participation. I will come back to this point when discussing the case of Taiwan.

However, there is a problem with Olson’s logic, that is, where do the selective incentives come from? Some types of selective incentives like material incentives may require the efforts of certain people to offer them in the first place. Other types of selective incentives such as solidary incentives may already exist among the potential participants, but it still requires the efforts of some to coordinate the participation of a large group of people. Thus, as argued by Richard Wagner (1966), among others, and later acknowledged by Olson himself (1971),
political entrepreneurs may play a significant role in facilitating the provision of selective incentives and thus overcome the free-rider problem.

All this shows that it is generally difficult for a large group of individuals to take collective action so as to realize the common interests, including forming a society-wide democracy movement. Yet, there have been successful democracy movements in various parts of the world. How have they been able to achieve it?

In essence, the collective action problem reflects the dilemma revealed in a prisoner’s dilemma game. In such a game, each player has two options, to cooperate (C) or to defect (D). If both choose C, each will get a payoff larger than the payoff each will receive as both select D. But if one opts for D (i.e., to free ride) while the other for C, the defector will get a payoff even larger than that obtained when both choose C, and the cooperator will suffer—worse than what he or she would get when both select D. Since for any player, the payoff from D is always better than that from C no matter whether the other chooses C or D, the dominant strategy for him or her will be D. As a result, (D, D) will be the equilibrium of the game, which is worse than (C, C) for both. This is a dilemma, that is, (D, D) is Pareto inferior to (C, C), but ends up being the equilibrium.²

In the context of the formation of a democracy movement, C and D can be regarded as participating in the movement and staying out, respectively. A potential participant may reason that as long as many others choose C, democracy may be brought into being. If he or she stays out, he or she cannot only enjoy the benefits brought about by democracy, but also forgo any costs associated with participating in the movement. He or she may thus free ride, and if a large

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² An explanation of the prisoner’s dilemma game can be found in nearly all standard game theory textbooks. An interesting account of the implications of the game including the infinitely repeated version, see Axelrod (1984).
number of individuals think the same way, no democracy movement can be successfully launched. How, then, to escape such a dilemma?

One way to solve the prisoner’s dilemma game is that if the game is played repeatedly for an infinite number of times, something like a trigger strategy may do the trick. In this case, (C, C) may be an equilibrium—albeit (D, D) remains an equilibrium, too. Consequently, the Pareto superior outcome may become the reality. In his popular work on Italy, Robert Putnam (1993) uses the repeated prisoner’s dilemma game to compare the situation in northern Italy as against that in southern Italy with the former being able to achieve (C, C) while the latter being trapped in (D, D).

Another possibility for the solution of the collective action problem is suggested by Olson himself (1965). He argues that if there have already existed a large number of small groups which are easier to form in the first place, then a federation of these small groups would render the formation of a large group easier. In terms of democratization, it means that if there are already a large number of groups existing in the society—a pluralistic social order (Dahl 1971) or a civil society—a democracy movement as a federation of some sort may be forthcoming. This is probably a more realistic approach. In the later discussion, I will touch upon a quasi-pluralistic social order which may serve the same purposes (Hsieh 2000, 2003).

So, if the collective action problem can be overcome, and a democracy movement indeed arises, the next question is: how is the movement able to pressure the authoritarian government to make changes? This can be thought of as a negotiation process between those in power and those in opposition. Figure 1 provides an extensive form game to depict such a process. It starts

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3 According to Olson (1965), small groups are easier to form since there often exists a large member—or several large members—who finds that by bearing the costs of forming the group all by him- or herself, he or she will still benefit from the formation of the group—albeit the provision of the common good may not be optimal.

4 This is also an important ingredient of social capital in Putnam (1993).
with the opposition to make or not to make a demand for democratic reform assuming that a large number of people in favor of democracy are able to solve the collective action problem. If the opposition decides not to make a demand, the game will end with the continuation of the status quo. But if the opposition chooses to make a demand, then the government will respond by either accommodating or not accommodating the opposition’s demand. If the government decides to accommodate, some form of democratization may be launched. Yet, given the assumption that the government will try to hold on to power as much as it can, a likely scenario will be limited liberalization instead of full democratization, that is, it will allow the opposition or the society as a whole to enjoy more liberties and/or to have more say in the policy-making process. As can be imagined, if the opposition is not satisfied, it will make a counterdemand, and the government would respond to the opposition’s counterdemand, and so on. To simplify the matter, I do not add the counterdemand in the model, and simply treat it as the beginning of a new game.

[Figure 1 about here]

However, if the government does not accommodate the opposition’s demand, the opposition may decide to revolt or not to revolt against the government’s decision. If the opposition chooses not to revolt, the game ends, and it will return to the status quo ante. Yet, if the opposition decides to revolt, there is some chance, \( p \), that the revolt may be successful, resulting in regime change and a democracy is born. But there is also a chance, \( 1 - p \), that the revolt may fail, and it will return to the status quo ante. However, in the case of a revolt, there are costs associated with the revolt. This is true no matter whether the revolt is successful or not.
Thus, some costs, $c_{Gov^1}(R)$ and $c_{Opp^1}(R)$, should be deducted from the payoffs for both the opposition and the government in the cases of either successful or failed revolt.

Since this is a game with complete and perfect information, we can solve it by backward induction. Hence, if the expected payoff of the revolt,

$$p[u_{Opp}^{1}(Democratization) - c_{Opp}(R)] + (1 - p)[u_{Opp}^{1}(Status Quo Ante) - c_{Opp}(R)] \text{ or}$$

$$pu_{Opp}^{1}(Democratization) + (1 - p)u_{Opp}^{1}(Status Quo Ante) - c_{Opp}(R),$$

is larger than the payoff from not to revolt, $u_{Opp}^{1}(Status Quo Ante)$, the opposition would challenge the government by revolting. Or if the reverse is true, the opposition will not revolt. And after assessing the opposition’s last move, we can go back to the government’s decision concerning accommodating or not accommodating. The government will then compare the payoffs from accommodation and no accommodation, taking into account the move taken by the opposition at the last decision node of the game. After figuring out the government’s decision to accommodate or not to accommodate, we can move further back to the opposition’s initial decision about making or not making a demand after taking into account all the subsequent moves.

In solving such a game, a key question is the $p$ value which is related to the relative strength between the government and the opposition. If the government is a lot more powerful than the opposition, then $p$ will be small, and the opposition may decide not to make a demand, or even if it makes a demand, the government may choose to ignore or crack down on it. Of course, if the reverse is true, the opposition would make a demand, and the governing elites would either have to accommodate or else face a strong challenge posed by the opposition if they decide not to accommodate. Liberalization or regime change are possible outcomes.
Oftentimes, the government is powerful given its control over all kinds of resources, including the coercive power; thus the prospect of democratization boils down to the question of the empowerment of the opposition. If a lot of people are in favor of democracy, and are able to solve the collective action problem and to assemble a significant amount of resources—manpower, money, or the support of foreign powers—in their hands, the chances of democratization will surely be enhanced.

In the following sections, I will first examine the case of Taiwan, and assess how its experience in democratic transition fits in with the framework described above, and then discuss whether China will follow in Taiwan’s footsteps by transitioning to democracy.

**Democratic Transition in Taiwan**

Taiwan transited to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. How was it able to do so at this juncture? Let us start with preference formation. First off, Taiwan is a Confucian society. As argued by many (e.g., Huntington 1992; Hsieh 2018), Confucianism is not particularly conducive to democracy given its stress on hierarchy in social structure.

In an ideal Confucian world, society is seen as being composed of a web of dualistic interpersonal relationships: sovereign-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. For each dyad, there is a superior and a subordinate. And the superior should set an example for the subordinate to follow, and the subordinate should emulate the superior. If anyone knows his or her role and behaves properly in these interpersonal relationships, the society will be in harmony. Obviously, this is a hierarchical structure, and is at variance with individualism on which liberal democracy is based (Pennock 1979).
To be fair, there are traces of “of the people” and “for the people,” if not “by the people,” in Confucian tradition. In the words of Mencius, one of the most liberal thinkers in Confucianism,

The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler. (Lau 1970)

That is, people’s wellbeing should be of utmost concern to the rulers. Mencius went even further by maintaining that people have the right to rebel if the ruler does not fulfill his or her obligations:

King Hsuan of Chi asked, “Is it true that Tang banished Chieh and King Wu marched against Tchou?” “It is so recorded,” answered Mencius. “Is regicide permissible?” “A man who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator, while one who cripples rightness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an ‘outcast.’ I have indeed heard of the punishment of the ‘outcast Tchou,’ but I have not heard of any regicide.” (Lau 1970)

This is, of course, not “by the people” even though it does legitimize the right to rebel against the rulers. Indeed, other than the admonition of caring for the people, there has been little to say about how the people may play a more active role in the political process in Confucianism. The ruler is a father figure—taking care of the people just like what a father is expected to do for his family.

It should be noted that Confucianism is more than a philosophy or a school of thought in Confucian societies; it also shapes the behavior of the people in their daily lives (Mou et al. 1958). In many ways, it is different from Western philosophical discourses which do not necessarily affect people’s lives. This has something to do with the fact that Confucianism was established as the state philosophy two thousand years ago in China, and had been reinforced by an examination system for recruiting dynastic officials. To a certain extent, it functions just like a religion. It is thus meaningful to talk about Confucianism in figuring out what Confucian culture is just like the study of the Bible in understanding the Christian culture.
So, given the Confucian legacy, what can we expect the people’s views on democracy in Taiwan (or any other Confucian society)? This is an empirical question. We may get some clues from survey data.

But first, it is a no-brainer that culture may change. In the case of Taiwan, Confucian legacy has surely been molded or remolded by, among others, Western and Japanese cultures through trade, studying abroad, news media, and even Hollywood movies. And the long-ruling party KMT, even during the authoritarian period, had been constantly talking about democracy which is part of its official ideology, the Three Principles of the People, so as to distinguish itself from the Chinese Communist regime on the mainland. The school kids were taught about democracy, and Taiwanese citizens were given the opportunities to vote in local elections and later in the supplementary elections for the members of the national legislatures.

So, obviously, culture changes. But how much change has there been in Taiwan’s culture with regard to the popular attitude toward democracy? In the Asian Barometer surveys conducted in 2005-2008, there is a question about to what extent the respondents would want their country to be a democracy. Only 63.8 percent of Taiwanese respondents prefer democracy to dictatorship—about the same as the responses given by people in China (64.8 percent) but a lot lower than in many other East Asian countries, democratic or not, where about 80 to 90 percent of the respondents prefer democracy to dictatorship (Hsieh 2018). This shows that the support for democracy in Taiwan—also China—was lukewarm at best.

More troublesome are the responses to the question about the tradeoff between democracy and economic development. Among the Taiwanese, 73.7 percent indicate that economic development is definitely more important or somewhat more important than

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5 The respondents were asked to pick a score between 1 and 10 with 1 referring to complete dictatorship and 10 to complete democracy. Here, the support for democracy refers to those who choose a score between 6 and 10.
democracy with only 15.4 percent feel that democracy is more important. The comparable figures for China are 51.4 percent and 12.8 percent, respectively (Hsieh 2018).  

In a series of surveys conducted by the Opinion Research Taiwan, Election Study Center of National Chengchi University, and the Taiwan Elections and Democratization Studies surveys, there is a question about the tradeoff between reform and stability. In all these surveys, an overwhelming majority of Taiwanese respondents leaned toward stability instead of reform, showing that Taiwanese are, in general, quite conservative in their attitude toward change (Hsieh 2003).

Of course, it is hard to determine to what extent Taiwanese’s lukewarm support for democracy is linked to its Confucian legacy. But given the stress on hierarchy and harmony in Confucianism, there must be some connections between the two.

So, in view of the Taiwanese culture, the prospect of democratization should not be high there. Nonetheless, Taiwan did transit to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What else had pushed the Taiwanese to accept democracy?

As discussed earlier, another possibility is instrumental (i.e., out of economic or noneconomic concerns). As argued by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), the poor—sometimes joined by the middle class—may gain de facto power as a result of some exogenous shocks, and may ask for democracy to institutionalize their de factor power, that is, to make sure that the authoritarian leaders’ commitment to redistribute will be credible even after the effect of exogenous shocks subsides. Did the poor or the middle class push for democracy in Taiwan?  

6 Among East Asian countries, the support for economic development was generally higher than that for democracy. Even in Japan, the respective figures were 45.1 percent and 40.0 percent (Hsieh 2018).

7 For a discussion of the role played by the middle class in Taiwan’s democratization, see, for example, Cheng (1989).
However, there are problems—other than the collective action problem—with such an argument. First, Taiwan is a well-known case of “growth with equity,” which contradicts the Kuznets curve (Fei et al. 1979). Thus, supposedly, the demand for redistribution should not be as strong as other societies at a similar level of economic development. Second, in the case of the middle class, given that Taiwan’s economy just took off not long ago—especially if we trace Taiwan’s democracy movement to the emergence of the Tangwai (literally outside the party) movement in the early 1970s—the middle class was not that sizeable. Consequently, the argument on the basis of economic interests may miss the point.

I argued elsewhere that a quasi-pluralistic social order may have played a much more important role in Taiwan’s transition to democracy (Hsieh 2000, 2003). It originates from the fact that up until the late 1980s and early 1990s, Taiwanese politics was very much controlled by the minority Mainlanders who fled from mainland China to Taiwan around 1949. Many in the majority local Taiwanese lamented that they were excluded from the political process. The ethnic conflict which was later supplemented by the national identity controversy provided a strong impetus for some Taiwanese to push for democracy. This is not to deny that some people, both local Taiwanese and Mainlanders, did cherish the intrinsic value of democracy, but for a democracy movement to succeed, to have enough people be involved is essential—even though many of them may be attracted to the movement for reasons other than the intrinsic value of the notion. This type of competition between ethnic groups is, of course, not a pluralistic social order or a civil society in the traditional sense of the word; I thus coined a term, quasi-pluralistic social order, to depict such phenomena in my earlier works (Hsieh 2000, 2003).

Now, even if a large number of people may value democracy for one reason or another, it is important that they will be able to overcome the collective action problem before they are able
to push the authoritarian regime to make concessions or to replace it by a democratic one. But how will the collective action problem be solved?

One possibility is the existence of a pluralistic social order or a civil society in which a large number of groups have already existed so that a democracy movement as a federation of smaller groups may be formed easily. It is true that prior to democratic transition in Taiwan, there had already had some relatively independent groups which exerted a certain degree of power in the political process (Chu and Hsieh 1989). Yet, to argue that they were the driving force for Taiwan’s democratization may not be accurate empirically. In a sense, they grew with democratic transition rather than serving as an impetus for the transition.

Probably a better explanation is the quasi-pluralistic social order mentioned above. The quasi-pluralistic social order helps solve the collective action problem in two ways. First, it provides a kind of purposive incentive for the participants to join the movement (Wilson 1995). This type of purposive incentive is similar to ideology in Acemoglu and Robinson’s model (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). The participants may receive some psychological benefits, apart from the common interest, by taking part in the movement. Second, a quasi-pluralistic social order means that there have already existed some rudimentary social groupings that may facilitate the formation of a large democracy movement.

Indeed, as far as I can tell, the quasi-pluralistic social order did play an indispensable role in helping overcome the collective action problem during Taiwan’s democratization process. It should also be noted that there were local elections as well as supplementary elections for the national legislatures. These occasions provided the opposition with a platform to mobilize their supporters. For a democracy movement to succeed, it is not necessary to get things done in the streets; it can also exert strong pressures on the authoritarian regime at the polls.
After the opposition is able to mobilize its supporters, the next stage will be the negotiation game between the authoritarian regime and the opposition. Here, the relative strength between the two is the key. In the case of Taiwan, under the quasi-pluralistic social order, the opposition’s strength came from, among other things, the popular support it received at the polls and elsewhere. Sensing the shifting popular support, the governing elites decided to make concessions, paving the way for eventual transition to democracy. It is noteworthy that Taiwan’s experience in democratic transition is gradual and relatively peaceful. Ethnic and national identity conflicts may be lamented by some as a destabilizing force—indeed, it may be—but it may, occasionally, bring about something positive to the society.

**Could Taiwan’s Experience Be Transplanted to China?**

Then, is Taiwan a model suitable for China? In a way, a case can be made about Taiwan serving as a model of democratization in China. First, both have strong Confucian legacy; thus, if one could achieve democratic transition, the other should potentially be able to as well. Second, both have been doing very well economically. Today’s China matches what Taiwan was back in the 1980s. Hence, it is not unreasonable to assume that after years’ economic development, democracy may emerge in China—possibly in a not-too-distant future (e.g., Diamond 2012).

However, the reality on the ground is not that rosy. As a matter of fact, the Chinese Communist regime has been moving in an opposite direction at least in the past several years. What goes wrong? Will the Taiwan model provide us with some hope for democratization in China?
Again, let us start with preference formation. As a society with Confucian legacy, the Chinese culture may not be particularly conducive to democracy. But of course, as in the case of Taiwan and elsewhere, culture changes. One important source of change comes from the West, which can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty. And the development after the economic reform in the late 1970s has further increased the interactions between China and the West. Yet, overall, the impact of the West on the Chinese culture may not be as significant as in Taiwan.

Another important source shaping the Chinese culture is Maoist ideology. During the Mao era, a lot of old cultural tendencies were attacked and supposedly dismantled. But how likely it is to overhaul people’s psyche in a short period of time is doubtful. Indeed, a lot of old practices have resurfaced after the end of the Mao era.

Of course, it is a mistake to argue that Maoist ideology did not affect the Chinese culture in any way. As far as democracy is concerned, his legacy is at least twofold. First, his obsession with collectivities moved the society further away from the foundation of liberal democracy. Second, ironically, his call for rebelling against the authorities may resonate with the notion of democracy; yet, obviously, his idea of the right to rebel is a negative power, not a way to involve the masses in policy-making in a constructive manner.

Thus, we should not expect that the Chinese lean more toward democracy than people in Taiwan. But as shown in the data of the Asian Barometer surveys of 2005-2008, the proportion of respondents who were in favor of democracy in China (64.8 percent) was about the same as those in Taiwan (63.8 percent), and yet interestingly, only 1.4 percent of the Chinese preferred dictatorship as compared to 7.4 percent of the Taiwanese who revealed such a preference. But these figures may not be comparable since people may have different ideas of democracy in mind (Hsieh 2018).
Moreover, in making a tradeoff between democracy and economic development, far fewer respondents in China (51.4 percent) felt that economic development was more important than democracy than those in Taiwan (73.7 percent), but only 12.8 percent in the Chinese sample believed democracy was more important as against 15.4 percent in Taiwan (Hsieh 2018).

Overall, from a cultural perspective, China is no better than Taiwan in upholding the notion of democracy. Then, how about the economic or noneconomic interests which may potentially drive people to embrace democracy?

In Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2006) redistributive model of democratization, the poor occasionally joined by the middle class—may ask for democracy as a way to guarantee the concessions made by the governing elites. According to their argument, democratization may not occur if equality is very low since the poor may not feel the need to push for redistribution, and it will not take place, either, when equality is very high because the balance of powers between the government and the opposition may be tilted in favor of the former. Thus, it is only in the middle range of inequality that democratization is most likely to take place.

It is true that distribution of income and wealth has deteriorated in China in the reform era. At this moment, it is a lot more unequal than Taiwan—or on a par with, but from time to time worse than, the United States—but is still better than, say, many Latin American countries. In this context, will the poor (or the middle class) call for democracy for the sake of redistribution? There seems to be no sign showing that this is happening. It is true that there are a lot of protests in China these days, but these are mostly small-scale events targeted at local officials (O’Brien and Li 2006). There is simply not much talk—involving a large segment of the society—about democracy yet.
Ansell and Samuels’s (2014) model may be more relevant here. They argue that democracy results from the bourgeoisie’s fear of being expropriated by the authoritarian regime. Since China has been doing very well economically, could we expect that the newly rich may rise up against the Communist rule for fear of being expropriated? Maybe not—at least for the moment. On the one hand, Chinese economy is still growing, so as long as the economic pie is expanding, the incentive to fight against the government will be diminished. On the other hand, many rising economic elites benefit from the support of the state. The symbiotic relationships between the state and the businesses render the latter vulnerable vis-à-vis the former. The situation is very different from, say, Britain at the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 or the Reforms of 1832 and 1867.

Thus, it is difficult to see that a powerful democracy movement may grow out of the bourgeoisie in China.

In the case of Taiwan, there are ethnic/national identity conflicts. China suffers from such conflicts as well. However, Han Chinese account for over 91 percent of the total population, and among the 55 minorities, only a handful of them (e.g., Uighurs, Tibetans, etc.) in the periphery cause trouble to the Communist regime. There is simply no quasi-pluralist social order of the kind seen in Taiwan, which, if exists, would drive a large number of people to embrace the notion of democracy as a means of redressing the grievances of some social groupings.

Then, even if a large number of people may feel that democracy is desirable, how they will be able to solve the collective action problem is another hurdle that the opposition needs to cross over. First off, China does not yet have a truly pluralistic social order (or a vibrant civil society). Associations are severely restricted, especially in areas related—or even just remotely related—to politics. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for a democracy movement as a federation of some sort to be formed. In addition, as noted above, a quasi-pluralistic social order

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8 For an account of these events on democratization in Britain, see Ansell and Samuels (2014).
helped solve the collective action problem for the democracy movement in Taiwan, along with local elections and supplementary elections for the national legislatures serving as platforms for the opposition to mobilize its supporters. It is unlikely that a quasi-pluralistic social order will emerge in China, not to mention the fact that there are only highly restricted elections for the local people’s congresses. The highly acclaimed village committee elections are relatively free and fair, but are still not very meaningful since the party secretaries remain powerful in most cases. (Strictly speaking, village committees are not part of the state apparatus.)

It should also be noted that China is a huge country. The size of the country also creates an additional obstacle for the formation of a strong nationwide democracy movement (Hsieh 2003). China is just very different from Taiwan.

Furthermore, even if, for some reason, a democracy movement is formed, and the players are playing the democratization game as depicted in Figure 1, will the opposition be able to force the government to make concessions or to achieve regime change? A key point, as discussed earlier, is the relative strength between the government and the opposition, which is represented by the $p$ value. In a way, it is not unthinkable that as a result of economic development, the potential opposition may gain a certain degree of leverage by controlling some resources in their hands, but compared to the overwhelming capacity of the state, it is hard to imagine that the opposition will have the upper hand in dealing with the Chinese Communist regime. To some extent, economic development may empower the opposition, but it may as well strengthen the state capacity, particularly in the type of economic system we see in China today. In the era of information technology, people in the streets may be able to communicate more effectively with each other, but at the same time, the government has also sharpened its toolkit in monitoring and controlling the populace.
The depiction of the prospect of democracy in China is pretty gloomy here. But realistically, this is probably the case—at least in the foreseeable future. So, is Taiwan a good model for China? My answer is definitely no.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I try to come up with a general model of democratization, and then apply it to the two cases, Taiwan and China. And my argument is clear: Even though the two societies are similar in many ways, the development path that each may take may be very different given a variety of factors. The Taiwan model cannot be readily transplanted to China. I do not think China will become democratic in the foreseeable future as Taiwan was able to achieve in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Of course, I do not rule out the possibility that over the long haul, the preferences of the Chinese people may change as a consequence of cultural change or the fear of expropriation by the state. Or there may be some exogenous shocks that will provide the citizens with some de facto power, in Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2006) terms, giving some leverage to the people in the streets to force the government to make changes. Or some Chinese leaders may change their mind and are willing to move the society in a different direction. But thus far, these scenarios are not very likely.
Figure 1: The Democratization Game

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Opp.} & \quad \text{Gov't} \\
D \quad \text{A} & \quad R \quad \text{Nature} \quad 1 - p \\
\sim D \quad \text{Opp.} & \quad \text{Opp.} \quad \sim R \\
& \quad (u_{\text{Opp.}}(\text{Status Quo}), \ u_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(\text{Status Quo})) \\
& \quad (u_{\text{Opp.}}(\text{Status Quo Ante}), \ u_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(\text{Status Quo Ante}), c_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(R)) \\
& \quad (u_{\text{Opp.}}(\text{Democratization}), \ u_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(\text{Democratization}), c_{\text{Opp.}}(R)) \quad (u_{\text{Opp.}}(\text{Democratization}) - c_{\text{Opp.}}(R), \ u_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(\text{Democratization}) - c_{\text{Gov'\prime}}(R))
\end{align*}
\]

Notations:

D or \(\sim D\): To demand or not to demand
A or \(\sim A\): To accommodate or not to accommodate
R or \(\sim R\): To revolt or not to revolt
\(c(R)\): Cost of revolt
Bibliography


