

# JOSEP COLOMER ON CHINA

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## One Country, Three Systems

About twenty years ago the Communist government of China (officially People's Republic of China) offered the Nationalist rulers in Taiwan (officially Republic of China) a formula for reunification similar to the one arranged for the handover of Hong Kong, which was labelled by *Deng Xiaoping* "[one country, two systems](#)". However, during the last period Taiwan has liberalized and democratized and now it is much ahead of the institutional formulas which are really implemented in Hong Kong. The Hongkongers might prefer, in fact, to enjoy constitutional rules similar to those in Taiwan.

Ten years ago Hong Kong ceased being a British colony and became a "special administrative region" of China. The Chinese communists accepted that for 50 years, that is, until 2047, they would facilitate the development of the capitalist economy in Hong Kong (which is actually what they are trying to do in mainland China too) and would give Hongkongers broad political autonomy except in defence and foreign affairs. In reality Hong Kong looks much as a different country, having not only an outstanding economic and urban development, but its own passport, borders control, currency and co-official languages (Cantonese, more different from Mandarin than one could expect, and English, less popular than one could expect), while it is being submitted to close political control by the rulers in Beijing.

There were virtually free elections in Hong Kong in 1995, just two years before the British handover, for the first time in 150 years of colonial rule. But the invention was quickly dismantled by the Chinese government when it took over. Now [Beijing maintains in Hong Kong a framework similar to the previous colonial experience](#). The Chief Executive of Hong Kong has formally wide powers analogous to those of the former colonial Governor. He is chosen every five years by an Election Committee formed of 800 members, mostly elected or appointed by business, professional, social and religious groups whose total number of voters encompasses about 5% of what would be universal suffrage. The Chief Executive is accountable and must report regularly to Beijing. Besides this, the Legislative Council is formed of 60 members, of whom 30 are indirectly chosen in "functional" constituencies of corporatist profile and limited franchise and 30 are elected in territorial constituencies. The pro-democracy parties usually collect about 60% of popular votes in the latter elections, but they find themselves in minority in the

Council in front to the mostly pro-Beijing “functional” delegates.

Roughly speaking, during the last ten years Hongkongers have replaced the British colonial administration with the Chinese one. But the Basic Law of Hong Kong which was agreed by the British and the Chinese governments establishes that the “ultimate aim” of the system is to introduce universal suffrage elections. A few months ago the current Chief Executive released a ‘Green Paper on Constitutional Development’ proposing cosmetic changes, while pro-democracy legislators managed to agree on a plan to abolish the ‘functional’ constituencies by 2012 and elect all seats by a mixed system of proportional representation and plurality rule. In the midst of some open discussion, pro-Beijing officers are suggesting, however, that universal suffrage elections for the Chief Executive should be postponed to 2017 or perhaps 2022 and for the Legislative Council to 2020.

Meanwhile [the political process in Taiwan has accelerated](#). For a long period the nationalist Kuomintang party maintained in the island an authoritarian regime, artfully supported by the fiction that most members of the Assembly represented mainland China –actually the same people who had been elected in 1947 remained in their seats for more than 40 years without re-election. They, however, eventually resigned, and the system was open to multiparty competition. In 2000 there was alternation in government and the first non-Kuomintang president was democratically elected.

The paradox is now this. In the coming year 2008, there will be democratic elections in Taiwan with high rivalry between candidates still pro-Chinese reunification and others pro-independence. A few months later in the year there will be nondemocratic legislative elections in Hong Kong too, with pro-Beijing and pro-democracy candidates running. For [the Taiwanese, the existence of “two systems” is leading to “two countries”](#), while for [the Hongkongers two actual countries are submitted to one system](#). Deng Xiaoping’s original formula has been dismissed on both fronts.

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## The Chinese Empire Could Burst

The unavoidable comment in China is that political liberalization might threaten the unity of such a huge country. The empire could burst ('éclater', in a comparable manner as had been predicted by Carrère d'Encausse for the Soviet Union).

As a very old empire, China has indeed expanded and contracted over the territory with no a priori fixed boundaries. Still during the 20th century the boundaries of China have been redrawn a few times, in particular after the formation of a new republic of Mongolia in 1911, the separation of Taiwan after 1949, the annexation of Tibet in 1951, and the handover of Hong Kong and Macau in 1997 and 1999. In China the appearance of some high degree of ethnic homogeneity may be only the perception of the ignorant external observer, since relevant religious, race and language differences exist among its inhabitants. Although about half of the population officially reports no organized religious affiliation, apparently hundreds of millions practice folk religious traditions and have informal ties to local temples and house churches. While Han Chinese makes up the vast majority of the population, its distribution is highly uneven with large parts of western China having Han Chinese as a minority. The common written language acts as the standard used by an actual minority of the population over a continuum of spoken languages and dialects –apparently with differences as notable as those between, say, different Latin-derived languages in Europe, which may make people from different places unable to understand each other.

So far, villages are the only level of the institutional structure that has been open to people's direct elections. Village committee elections were introduced to curtail growing unrest in rural China after the communist system of 'production brigades' was abolished. The new village committees, each formed by three to seven members, oversee most of the daily affairs of the village people. According to official estimates, about 600 million people may have participated in direct village elections at least once since 1999. These elections imply direct nomination of candidates, more candidates than seats to be filled, secret ballot, several ballot procedures of voting for individuals, and majority rule. It should be noted, however, that the average number of inhabitants in a village is below one thousand people, so making these elections a local affair with no visible impact on the general party's and institutional structure. Certain analyses pretend that village elections may mark the

beginning of a process of democratization from below. But in order to do so, the crucial step would be the implementation of elections at the township level and above, on which there have been only a few experiments and much resistance.

The strategic decision of democratizing a complex multilevel structure, either 'from below' or 'from above' may have important consequences on the outcome of the whole process. This issue has been widely neglected in the literature on democratization. But, as it was addressed some time ago by *Juan Linz* and *Al Stepan*, "the sequence of elections, per se, can help construct or dissolve identities... [because] elections, especially 'founding elections', help create agendas, actors, organizations, and most importantly, legitimacy and power".

Specifically, if during a process of liberalization or democratization, the first elections are local or regional, as happened in the Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there are strong incentives for people participating to focus on local, regional and ethnic issues, organize local, regional and ethnic parties, and as a result weakening the legitimacy of the union. This effect can be stronger if the general design in the center does not include unambiguous democratization, but only some degree of liberalization, since this can give more open regional and local elections and the subsequent representative structures higher levels of legitimacy. In contrast, if all-union elections are held first, there are strong incentives to create all-union parties and an all-union agenda enabling the elected representatives to make binding decisions about the future of the union. Precisely because China is a so vast 'empire' with significant economic and territorial inequalities and high levels of ethnic pluralism, democratizing the 'center', that is, the all-China institutions, may be a priority to keep the union up.

China: Ethnolinguistic Groups



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## COMMENTS

**Rein Taagepera said...**

Rearranging the order of elections could not have preserved the Soviet Union any more than Spain. It lacked the essential cultural glue.

Portuguese still is the prestige language in Angola (not to mention French in Morocco), but Russian lacks any cultural prestige in Estonia.

This degree of imperial failure is quite remarkable.

How is it in Tibet or Siankiang? -- I have no idea.

## **Rein**

Irvine, California, and Tartu, Estonia

### **Josep Colomer *said...***

The official version is that people from Sinkiang and from Shanghai, if they ever met, they would understand each other. But I read a few books on Chinese language (fascinating subject!) and I doubt so very much. At least Cantonese in Hong Kong is completely unintelligible for Mandarin-speakers and viceversa.

### **Rein Taagepera *said...***

It depends on whom one counts as "people". Native Uighurs, if they know only their own (Turkic) language, would not understand a word from a Shanghai person. But the central coast (Shanghai) version of Han is the likely lingua franca of Han colonists who have immigrated to Siankiang from all corners of China. Those Uighurs who have mastered some Chinese probably would also have been taught that version. It's a far cry from mutual non-understanding between Cantonese and Pekingese, where the differences are age-old. So the east-west dimension rather than the north-south dimension would be chosen as an apparently neutral example by those who stress uniformity, but they do so at the cost of counting only Han speakers as "people". I wonder if those Han colonists in Siankiang order Uighur speakers to "speak a human language" when interacting with them, the way Russian colonists did in Soviet Estonia.

### **Salvador Giner *said...***

It *will* burst!

I predicted in 1982, that the Russian system would break down, and precisely how it would. (*La Vanguardia*, 4 December 1982).

### **Jan-Erik Lane *said...***

Like Max Weber, you underestimate the role of naked power.

Perhaps it could be of interest to other scholars to realise that Weber left out naked power when theorizing political regimes. The most employed macro model in political science is still Max Weber's theory of legitimate authority or domination,

which all undergraduate students all over the world are being told. Scoring high on conceptual parsimony and empirical richness, it merely uses a couple of ideal-types to cover the historical variation in rulerships, from Ancient times to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when presidential and parliamentary democracy was becoming the most relevant choice of a regime. Weber wrote down his theory twice, one shorter version and one longer version – both published in his posthumous *Economy and Society* (1978). The incredible coverage of empirical details does hide the implicit model, which is true of any text by Weber, attempting to reconcile the historical method with the new tools of sociology.

Now, **Weber claims as his basic assumption that naked power cannot last. When a government uses merely the tools of repression, then it is bound to disintegrate and the rime will go down under.** The cement between rulers and the ruled is the belief in legitimacy –a special value orientation that confers moral acceptance upon the government from the population. And we all know that Weber identified three types of legitimacy: legal-rational or modern, charismatic or revolutionary, and traditional or customary.

Yet, naked power is more than a mere category to collect a few border line cases or outliers. Naked power can accomplish tremendous results, as with 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism, notwithstanding all the horrors involved in *The Final Solution*, the *Gulag camps*, the *Cultural Revolution* and bizarre North Korea. Naked power works to some extent in several Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, although carefully hidden behind Wahabism. Saddam Hussein, using somewhat unsuccessfully first Arab nationalism and later on Sunni tradition, could not be brought down except by military intervention. And Iran will not change, perhaps in hundred years, as Shi'ism *together with* naked power will prove irresistible. When naked power is employed, the outcome may be derisory, as in Latin America and Africa, when military regimes have proved incompetent. But that does not entail that all forms of naked power is inefficient. Far from it. **Authoritarianism in China may prove long lasting, especially when combined with stunning economic advances. The present Chinese regime will not hesitate to use a clever employment of the tools of repression, when confronted by a crisis.** Naked power is not ridiculous, but offers a basis of regime duration. And it can be brought to high levels of efficiency employing more and refined methods of intimidation and repression.

Naked power does not employ religion or ethnicity as the rationalisation of its domination. It just neutralises or eliminates whatever opposition comes its way.

**Jan-Erik Lane**

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## Can China Become Democratic?

I have participated in a three-day international workshop in Shanghai Jiaotong University focusing on the prospects for democracy in China. Let me say, first of all, that the visitor's impression regarding the current process of urban and economic growth and development in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing is even more impressive than what one can expect from reading and looking at pictures. The success of the economic course launched by Deng Xiao Ping since 1978, and especially during the last fifteen years or so, is out of question. How such a radical turn has been accepted by so many millions of people without major political resistance tells much about the disaster of the previous period and especially the destruction generated by Mao's 'cultural revolution'. However, **the prospects for the current economic process to lead to significant political liberalization and democratization look grim.**



Our Chinese colleagues basically transmit, with some twists and elaboration, the official message: China can become democratic only after a long period of economic growth which is still in an early period. Deng had said that there would be national elections after fifty years of development, so about 2037, while the most optimistic academics would bet now for about 2020. The echoes of the traditional political sociology on the **'preconditions' for democracy** are obvious. Actually this outlook is usually presented under the vest of political **'modernization'**, which implies that economic growth produces increasing social complexity and an educated middle class which, sooner or later, require political pluralism and accommodation. In China, while the benefits of foreign investments and the expansion of mass consumption were nearly-universal in the first years of economic opening, they are now increasingly mixed with broadening inequalities, continuous migrations from the countryside to the cities and underlying distress. What *Przeworski* labels 'redistributive fights' could indeed spread during the next few years. However, as recently noted by *Bueno de Mesquita* and *George Downs*, in China as in other countries we also observe the "ominous and poorly appreciated fact that economic growth, rather than being a force for democratic change in tyrannical states, can sometimes be used to strengthen oppressive regimes" ([CLICK](#)). In the typical exchange under an authoritarian regime, the subjects can renounce to choose or control the rulers in return for some favourable economic policy. In China a crucial element of the rulers' hold of power is, of course, the warning lesson implied by the **Tiananmen Square slaughter in 1989** --an episode which has become a kind of taboo and whose sole mention makes educated Chinese of these days very embarrassed.

The authorized discourse points to the internal evolution of the Communist Party as a promising march. A few years ago the party was defined no longer as of workers and peasants, but of "three represents", including intellectuals and entrepreneurs. Yet some people say that rather than entrepreneurs joining the party it's party members who become entrepreneurs and get rich --a "glorious"

achievement, in Deng's doctrine. A crucial issue in all dictatorships is the leader's succession. The Chinese have established some non-written rules to rotate the party leader every ten years, that is, every two party congresses, as they did successfully with the appointment of Jiang Zemin in 1992 and the current leader Hu Jintao in 2002. However, in the party congress held a few weeks ago there was no agreement on the future leader to take office in five years from now and two candidates seems to have been placed in potential rivalry. I was amazed by several positive references during our workshop to the **example of the Mexican PRI**, a former revolutionary, neatly authoritarian party which, relying upon some degree of economic success, was able to proceed to consecutive orderly successions of the leaders in power during several decades. The so-called 'limited pluralism' within the Chinese party is, in any case, extremely limited. Official data shows that in the previous party congress five years ago there were 6 percent more candidates to the Central Committee than seats to be filled, while this time there were 8.3 percent more. At this rhythm, the prospects for having two candidates per seat would definitely be placed in about thirty years from now.

An alternative hypothesis for a major political change should be based not on modernizing and liberalizing pressures derived from economic success but on failure. Some insiders predicted a few years ago "the coming collapse of China", which was expected precisely for 2007 as a consequence, among other factors, of China's new membership to the World Trade Organization and the subsequent external competition, business failures and social unrest. **Most authoritarian regimes fall because they fail**, not because they succeed, and then a democratic regime can be established by default even if the maturity of civil society and the diffusion of democratic values are meagre. This is what more or less happened in several Asian 'tigers' in the 1990s, including South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia, which turned to be, to be put in typical Maoist jargon, 'paper tigers'. The Chinese regime is also vulnerable, especially because, as one Chinese colleague remarked, the 'party-state' is becoming a 'state-party'. Corruption is widespread and rather than greasing the wheels of business it might have a negative impact on

growth. External shocks on energy or commerce are certainly possible. But against the implications of modernization theory, as far as considerable rates of economic growth will be maintained, I am afraid that what communist rulers and academics call "people's democratic dictatorship" will keep flourishing in China.



## COMMENTS

**Ronald J. Hill** *said...*

"Most authoritarian regimes fall because they fail, not because they succeed"

A variant on this would say that the Soviet regime, as an example, was a victim of its own success: it succeeded in generating the kind of society that could no longer be governed effectively by the methods used to promote the initial development.

Convinced by this success that the methods of rule were valid, the regime refused to adapt to cope with the complex society that it had brought into being. Its failure was a failure even to act on the logic of its own ideology, which posited that change in the economic base leads to change in the superstructure (the political system).

In refusing to countenance adaptation of the political system to cope with a complex economy and society, it was rejecting both Marxist theory and Western political sociology of the 1960s.

The Chinese, by contrast, appear to have solved that problem by relinquishing political power over the economy, which now relies on the market for direction, not on instructions from the state.

But the logic of both Marxist theory and political sociology remains - and to it should be added the experience of hundreds of thousands of Chinese who have experienced life in different societies and political systems (and even studied Western social science). The lesson of 1911 (and of imported ideas in other historical contexts) is that authoritarianism may be unable to survive indefinitely when there are competing values. 'Comrade Transistor' deprived authoritarian regimes of control over the circulation of ideas, and 'Comrade Internet' is potentially even more powerful.

Unless we believe that ideas and experiences count for nothing in politics, change is surely inevitable.

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**Jack said...**

This is a fascinating post. I'm surprised you can have a panel discussion like that in China. Then again, I've never been there.

I suspect China is more likely to see flagging economic growth than democratization in the medium term. The argument that China needs more "development" before it can become democratic is not a stupid one. The problem is one of thresholds; when is China developed enough? Who decides?