

## Chapter 2

# The Cry for Chinese Democratization: Between Idealism and Realism

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In this delicate situation, the generational power transfer from president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao to the new president Xi Jinping and the new premier Li Keqiang took place between November 2012 and April 2013. It was both preceded and accompanied by a remarkable upsurge of public protest at home and abroad over the Chinese government's undemocratic attitude. This was the case in particular with regard to:

- China's dealing with its domestic critics: dissidents, intellectuals, civil rights movements, civic groups, and new environmental movements, no longer confined to the coastal region but throughout the country;<sup>1</sup>
- Its antidemocratic propaganda among its democratic neighbors in order to convince adjacent countries of a system rapprochement toward the Chinese "one-party"- and "half-capitalism"-practice in the wake of the Western financial, economic, and debt crises, a move brought forward by China's "New Left"<sup>2</sup> in South Korea, but in different forms also throughout South East Asia;<sup>3</sup>
- Spectacular cases of censorship involving global media such as Google.<sup>4</sup>

Among the concerns linked to the impact of absent democracy on the development of the country was—and is—furthermore the environmental question, which is without doubt one of the biggest challenges of a country ridden by environ-

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<sup>1</sup>C. Larson: China's Emerging Environmental Movement. In: Yale University's: Yale Environment 360. Opinion, Analysis, Reporting and Debate, 03 June 2008, [http://e360.yale.edu/feature/chinas\\_emerging\\_environmental\\_movement/2018/](http://e360.yale.edu/feature/chinas_emerging_environmental_movement/2018/).

<sup>2</sup>C. W. Freeman III and W. J. Yuan: China's New Leftists and the China Model Debate after the Financial Crisis. A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011, [http://csis.org/files/publication/110728\\_Freeman\\_ChinaNew-Leftists\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110728_Freeman_ChinaNew-Leftists_Web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>D. C. Lynch: Rising China and Asian Democratization: Socialization to "Global Culture" in the Political Transformations of Thailand, China, and Taiwan. Stanford University Press 2006.

<sup>4</sup>G. Crovitz: Google Fights Back in China. The company is telling users when 'state-sponsored attackers' are compromising their accounts. In: Wall Street Journal, June 10, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303753904577454760037632208.html>. Cf. BBC News: China condemns decision by Google to lift censorship. In: BBC News, 23 March 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8582233.stm>.

mental scandals on a weekly, in certain regions daily, basis. Some, like Roskilde University's Department of Society and Globalization Ole Bruun, already speak of a "Confucian" challenge to the "global environmental order,"<sup>5</sup> because China has become one decisive factor for the future of the global environment, including global warming. The reason is not only its demographic size, making China the biggest polluter in the world, but also the strategy of the Hu–Wen years to exempt itself from international agreements, seeking classification as a "developing country" thus blocking further involvement of the United States and other major powers with the only exception of Europe. But any policy change cannot allegedly be managed without greater participatory structures, decentralization, and democratization.

As Bruun writes,

[D]espite a declared policy of introducing 'Ecological Civilization' in China, the Chinese government has not been able to halt environmental degradation. Environmental monitoring remains arbitrary, civil society and public interest are weak, and certain Chinese values as seen for example in traditional medicine are still contradictory to reaching a real turning point in attitudes to nature and environment. With China's rapidly expanding economic influence, raw materials and organic materials in many parts of the world are extracted for the Chinese market. The combination of authoritarian government, corruption, and socio-centric values present a rising challenge to environmental protection in developing countries, as well as globally.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time though, it must be admitted that even without democracy, China has become

the world's renewable energy powerhouse, due to a series of policies and plans that have encouraged renewable energy growth. In 2012, for the third year in a row it claimed the title of the world largest clean energy producer, with a massive 23 gigawatts of clean energy capacity. Between 2005 and 2012 China increased its wind generation capacity by nearly 50 times, adding an extra 36% in 2012 alone. China's solar sector is also growing, increasing by 75% in 2012, and it is predicted to grow by a further 300% to over 21 GW by 2015. China's clean energy budget is unmatched by any other nation on earth and at \$65.1 billion in 2012, was 20% more than in 2011.<sup>7</sup>

## The Democratization Debate: A Complicated Issue

Although because of these issues the "democratization outcry" considerably intensified in 2012–13, attempts to discuss democratization with China have a long tradition in the democratic hemisphere.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, there were some interesting

<sup>5</sup>O. Bruun: A "Confucian" Challenge to the Global Environmental Order? Lecture at the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies, May 30, 2013.

<sup>6</sup>O. Bruun: loc cit, <http://www.global.ucsb.edu/orfaleacenter/posters/bruun2013.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>C. Kennedy: China: World's largest polluter also leads clean-energy push. In: *Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Energy-Voices/2013/0430/China-World-s-largest-polluter-also-leads-clean-energy-push>.

<sup>8</sup>See for example B. Gilley: *China's Democratic Future*. Columbia University Press, New York 2004.

changes of strategy in the past few years, not with regard to the issue in principle, but concerning the general attitude of how it was proposed to China's leaders. Xi Jinping will consider these changes in attitude when concrete negotiations with the West proceed further.

First, the democratization topic that dominated the first two decades of China's post-1989 rise like a sort of Catonian *Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam* is in the meantime often delivered half-heartedly, not least because of China's growing economic and financial power and international diplomatic influence. The West has become visibly more prudent, if not in many ways reluctant, to enforce the democratization debate, not only with regard to Tibet but also concerning other "internal" Chinese issues in order not to risk "unnecessary" conflicts (as they are referred to now). This new approach of prudence and reticence is justified often by the "differing culture" of Asia that should be "respected" in its allegedly "original" approach on social organization patterns, an argument that just years ago would have been considered as politically incorrect.<sup>9</sup>

Second, there is the debate about liberal versus illiberal democracies abroad and their respective pros and cons for the future interests of the West, as carried on by intellectuals mainly in the United States. This debate is aiming towards a broader, more globally conceived "future of freedom"<sup>10</sup> in a "post-American world", integrating liberal and illiberal democracies. It is combined with the debate about "failed states"<sup>11</sup> born out of exaggerated democratization hopes.<sup>12</sup> This seems to have—consciously or unconsciously—noticeably lowered the Maslowian hierarchy of needs and the respective desires of the West, when it comes to participatory societal development abroad. It has reframed the Western demands for Chinese "democracy" towards a more cautious notion of "rule of law" or even "progress", that is, concepts of much lower expectations than those issued in the still (over-) confident 1990s until 9/11.<sup>13</sup>

Third, and probably most important, there is growing awareness that the "democratization" debate did little so far to ease the practical day-by-day problems of China's new middle-class citizens, its civil society, or the many ethnic groups within China that weren't broken by the decades-long attempts of Han-assimilation and the use of Confucianism for the cause of nationalization.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>A. Esarey: Culture Clash. Rising China versus Asian Democratization. In: Taiwan Journal of Democracy, Vol. 2, No. 2 (December 2006), pp. 189–194.

<sup>10</sup>F. Zakaria: The Future of Freedom. Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad. New York: W.W. Norton 2003.

<sup>11</sup>S. Patrick: "Failed" States and Global Security: Empirical Questions and Policy Dilemmas. In: International Studies Review, Volume 9 (4), Blackwell editors, pp. 644–662.

<sup>12</sup>F. Zakaria: The Post-American World. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. for example S. Zhao (ed.): Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law vs. Democratization. M. E. Sharp, 2006.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Democratic China online: <http://www.democraticchina.org/>.

## **The Western Cry for Democracy, Three Decades in the Process: Was it Helpful?**

Overall seen, the balance sheet of the international “democratizing China” discussion seems indeed to be mixed at best. On the one hand, the continuous democracy outcry has undeniably brought some improvements in day-to-day participation of sections of the population, at least in selected cases where projects were scrapped after public protests.<sup>15</sup> But in a more general view, it hasn’t so far substantially helped those groups who cultivate different ethnic identities (see, e.g., the case of Tibet), nor for those envisioning a kind of illiberal democracy of specifically Chinese traits. Neither has it been much help in the case of those rapidly growing issues the region and the West have in their dealings with the politics of the G-2 power,<sup>16</sup> such as, for example: economic and financial confrontation between China and the Western hemisphere, South China Sea islands competition, Malakka Straights conflict, the Taiwan question, currency, financial and trade issues, one-sided educational interrelation with the United States, competing interests in outer space such as the ownership of future territories and the race to Mars, technology and research in general (including espionage on crucial weapon systems such as the new F-35 fighter whose plans were allegedly stolen, together with other critical US avant-garde weapon systems, by Chinese hackers in May 2013<sup>17</sup>), or resource security through claim of territories in Africa and Latin America.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>See for example C. Tejada: Chinese Officials Scrap Project After Protests. In: *The Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443931404577554302141565274.html>.

<sup>16</sup>R. C. Bush III: The United States and China: A G-2 in the Making? In: Brookings Institution, Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, October 11, 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2011/10/11-china-us-g2-bush>.

<sup>17</sup>AP: Chinese hackers accessed F-35 designs after breaking into U.S. systems: report. In: *National Post*, May 28, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/28/u-s-and-australia-claim-chinese-hackers-responsible-for-stealing-weapon-designs-and-building-blueprints/>. Cf. T. Y. Jones, B. Trott and R. Taylor for Reuters: Chinese hackers steal U.S. weapons system designs, report says. In: *U. S. News on NBCNews.com*, May 28, 2013, [http://usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/05/28/18556787-chinese-hackers-steal-us-weapons-systems-designs-report-says?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/05/28/18556787-chinese-hackers-steal-us-weapons-systems-designs-report-says?lite); and *Daily Mail*: Plans for more than two dozen U.S. weapons systems—including an F35 fighter—have been stolen by Chinese hackers, claims Pentagon. In: *Mail Online*, May 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2331949/More-dozen-U-S-weapons-systems-compromised-Chinese-hackers.html>.

<sup>18</sup>C. Glaser: Will China’s Rise Lead to War? Why Realism does not mean Pessimism. In: *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

## Is China's Democratization Unavoidable and "Sure To Come, Almost Like a Natural Law"?

In this constellation, many observers question the style in which the democratization issue was handled in past decades by the West.<sup>19</sup> They question whether the time is right to point towards clearer—and, in some ways, more radical—goals: towards rapid and uncompromising democratization of China Western style.<sup>20</sup> Internationally respected dissidents such as Fang Lizhi, who died on April 6, 2012, said such a democratization to be the both necessary and unavoidable next step needed by a China otherwise succumbing to its inner contradictions, an opinion shared in substance by influential advisors to the Chinese government such as former UN-Science and Innovation Director and Dean of Environmental Sciences at UC Santa Barbara, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker. Weizsäcker—advisor on topics such as the reorientation of China's tax system and energy infrastructure towards sustainability and renewability in the framework of the 12th five-year-plan (governmental guideline) 2011–2015—is convinced that "China will have to become democratic in the next decades if it doesn't want to implode because of its growing social conflicts".<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Fang Lizhi famously (and repeatedly) had already continued to state since the 1990s, that "China's democratization is as unavoidable and inevitable as it is sure to come and function, almost like a natural law."<sup>22</sup>

But is this really going to be the case? Is democracy the next, unavoidable, potentially already close-to-realization step for a country in clear domestic crisis? And is it thus now as close at hand as never before? Or will the multiple crisis symptoms rather slow down progress towards greater participation and a more open societal debate, by requiring the government (at least in its own perception) "to rule with strong hand"?

## Signs and Signals

There are certainly some encouraging signs towards some kind of liberalization. Among them is the steadily rising number of Chinese "postmaterialists" or "social idealists" particularly in the middle and upper classes of the coastal regions. Ac-

<sup>19</sup> W. Zhang: What is Changing China. CITIC Press Corporation 2012.

<sup>20</sup> W. Zhang: Ideas Will Determine China's Future. The theories debated in Beijing these days are all statist. It's a sign of the establishment's bankruptcy. In: The Wall Street Journal, August 1, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444320704577562463319136168.html>. Cf. W. Wagner: Summer stress. China's Elite Wrangle Over New Leadership. In: Spiegel online, July 26, 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/chinese-leaders-using-summer-vacation-to-decide-on-coming-changes-a-846409.html>

<sup>21</sup> E. U. v. Weizsäcker in conversation with Roland Benedikter, Santa Barbara, February 2008. Archive of the author.

<sup>22</sup> F. Lizhi, quoted in: A. Ramzy: Fang Lizhi. In: Time, April 23, 2012, p. 13.

cording to data by Taiwan's Lu-huei Chen presented at the international conference *Social Change and Post-Materialism in Korea* in May 2012, China has one of the most rapidly growing numbers of people worldwide that cling to "post-materialism"—equality, fairness, quality of life, sustainability, self-realization and participatory values—more than any other nation in 2012.<sup>23</sup>

Although this may be a signal of slow but steady development towards a kind of "natural" democratization of China in the framework of value development on many different micro-levels from the bottom up, it could prove to be insufficient to nurture hopes for fast transformation towards liberal patterns on a systemic level. It could rather be that in a slower pace, maybe more appropriate to Chinese sensitivity, the rule of law—as historically first conceived in Western liberal terms—is still the most pressing *desideratum* in a country still widely dominated by family connections, personal favors, class and party affiliation, informal networks, and deliberate implementation of law according to those who have influence and money in given contexts and circumstances.

This leads us to the following conclusion. In the name of a moderate realism not inclined to offensive maneuvers, would a multistep process be more realistic, although certainly noticeably slower, than a direct aim towards democracy in China?

In other words, instead of framing the debate in terms of Western liberal democracy, an endeavor could be made to help the Chinese first to tackle an even more fundamental question: how to achieve, before everything else, the rule of law as the indispensable first and basic prerequisite of liberalism, let alone of democracy?

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<sup>23</sup>Lu-huei Chen and Ying-nan Chen, The National Chengchi University Taiwan's University Project: Post-materialism and Political Support in Taiwan and China. In: S. Kang (ed.): *Social Change and Postmaterialism in Korea*. Acta of the International Conference, Gyeongsang National University Jinju, May 24, 2012, Gyeongsang National University and National Research Foundation of Korea, pp. 22–36.

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