

**Paper title:** “An Appraisal of Three Liberal Contributions to Political Reform in China”

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### **Abstract:**

The debates on the future of China’s political system have faded in the West since the early 2010s, perhaps due to the lack of signs of openness at sight. However, the various representations/images of the future flowing within the Chinese educated rank (in government, think tanks and universities), contribute to understand current policy making and what the “yet to come” might hold.

In the light of the role played by educated cadres in both shaping and reflecting the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) policy agendas, examining these images can be valuable to calculate what the political trend is likely to become. This paper’s main premise is that what elites perceive about the PRC’s path in politics will correlate considerably with what such path eventually becomes.

The following analysis will touch upon the scholarly production of three selected intellectuals, whose approach to the study of politics –even though they do not stick to the Party line- enjoy a considerable degree of recognition in the PRC elite, given their regular access to publishing in the Chinese establishment press.

In the final remarks, a few considerations will be presented on the possible outcome of the ongoing thrust towards modern governance.

### **Keywords:**

Futures debate, China, political reform, scholars’ images, elite decisions, rule of law.

## **“An Appraisal of Three Liberal Contributions to Political Reform in China”**

### The centrality of debating on the trajectory of Chinese politics

The debates on the future of China's political system have faded in the West since the early 2010s, perhaps due to the lack of signs of openness at sight. This fact led Kevin O'Brien from University of California-Berkeley, to assess why most specialists on Chinese politics perceived the topic to be closed, thus consenting that authoritarianism “is here to stay”<sup>i</sup>. A consensus apparently surfaced, giving way to the idea that the PRC's rise was a positive element for world politics, as China –regardless of its domestic political development- would bring prosperity and peace to the world.

In addition, the task of debating on the future of China's political system is hindered by the fact that predicting with a high degree of accuracy in social sciences is almost impossible, because of the intervention of human free will and fortuitous events. No matter how scientific a model to foresee developmental trajectories may appear to be, it earns reservations in the academia.

However, giving up scholarly work to analyze which plausible trajectory China might take in politics may reduce our field to exclusively probe into what can be empirically demonstrated. This, in turn, will result in relegating research to working on the political history of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

David J. Staley from Ohio State University stated that “the future cannot be predicted”, yet this should not prevent researchers “from creating useful representations about the future”<sup>ii</sup>. In the field of analyzing future trends of Chinese politics, the various representations/images of the future flowing within the educated rank (in government, think tanks and universities), contribute to understand current policy making and what the “yet to come” might hold.

Wendell Bell from Yale pinpointed nine major tasks to evaluate the future of China, identifying “the study of images of the future” amongst them. The author also criticizes conventional thinking on the examination of the prospects of the PRC, which embraces (a) the belief that China's rise will go on inexorably, leading the country to become a superpower and (b) the idea that China will either crackup or decay into low or zero growth<sup>iii</sup>.

Of course, Chinese intellectuals' images are not the only decisive factor influencing the PRC's political trajectory. Indigenous material factors (like geography, the economy and the environment) along with exogenous factors (e.g. events from the international domain) are also significant.

In the light of the role played by educated cadres play in both shaping and reflecting the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policy agendas, examining these images can be valuable to calculate what the political trend is likely to become.

Why is important to explore China's political trends? The CCP faces the contradiction that distresses all modernizing authoritarian regimes: the Party cannot govern without sticking at providing economic growth. Thereby, it engenders a demanding civil society that pushes toward more participation in the "*res publica*". Larry Diamond from Hoover Institution stated in 2012 that "a CCP collapse could come quite possibly within the next ten years", although the first post-Communist regime would probably be "a much more dangerous form of authoritarian rule, perhaps led by a nationalistic military"<sup>iv</sup>.

This potential scenario reinforces the need to reopen the debate on the future of political reform in the PRC, addressing not only the issue of democratization but also how plausible is that democracy is the only type of political system ultimately conceivable for China? In this sense, should we not contemplate that the experiences of Western countries (the sources of social science generalized as effective for all) may not help as guides to the future of China's political system?

In fact, part of the CCP's motivation for discarding democratization seems to be linked with resisting a world order that has as center the United States, which insists on the universal applicability of liberal-democratic principles. Those in the PRC elite who uphold this vision find Western pressure towards democratization as a maneuver aimed at weakening China, in order to cause its breakup<sup>v</sup>.

Almost forty years of economic reform and opening have brought tremendous changes to Chinese society, to which the political system has yet to adapt. Nowadays, there are answers to the extent of such adaptation not only from conservative intellectuals (which encompass neoleftists and neoauthoritarians) but also liberal thinkers, whose works reach the establishment press<sup>vi</sup>.

The question of how China's political system will change is fully open. This paper main premise is that what China's elites perceive about the PRC's path in politics will correlate considerably with what such path eventually becomes. The following analysis will touch upon the scholarly production of three selected intellectuals, whose approach to the study of politics –even though does not stick to the Party line- do enjoy a considerable degree of recognition in the PRC elite, given their regular access to publishing in the Chinese establishment press. Their contributions reveal that there is not a monolithic view on the path of political reform (but rather varying points of view), and stimulate weighing their influence on the elite (and whether that might produce results).

## Liberal approaches to political reform: the views of Yu Keping, Han Yunchuan and Xiao Gongqin

The first work on political reform worth mentioning in this account is Yu Keping's. Yu was Director of Peking University's Center for Research on Chinese Government Innovation, and Director of the Comparative Politics and Economics Research Center at the CCP's Central Translation and Compilation Bureau. Even though he gained notoriety in the West for his 2006 essay "Democracy is a Good Thing" ("Minzhu Shige Hao Dongxi")<sup>vii</sup>, Yu's other works do not enjoy so much publicity in the West.

In the year 2005 Yu Keping had written an "internal circulation only" ("*neibu*" in Chinese) article, in which he stated "with the success of the reform and opening policy, Chinese society has changed substantially... The new situation demands changes in politics for the country to become harmonious".

Hence he numbered four measures to assist the Party "to attain the goal of building a harmonious society". They were: "confirming the CCP's obligation with the people, upholding the rule of law, enhancing citizen's participation in governance, and boosting transparency in decision making"<sup>viii</sup>.

Some years later, Yu expressed more in detail his opinion about democracy, when he took part with a chapter in the book "World Megatrends and Challenges China Will Face in the Coming Decade". Therein Yu affirmed that "We have to accept that democracy is an unstoppable trend in world history, the logic of human development and a central demand to socialism". Yu implied that "only by following the global trend of democratization, can it be achieved". He went on to indicate "If we don't succeed in the pursuit of democracy, then we are not true members of the Chinese Communist Party". Finally, Yu affirmed "Developing democracy is a road that must be taken in the great renaissance of the Chinese nation and is an historical responsibility that the CCP must bear"<sup>ix</sup>.

Probably because of his commitment to improving governance, Yu Keping became deputy chief of the CCP Central Committee's Translation and Compilation Bureau (a policy-oriented Party think tank). In October 2015 it was informed that he resigned his post in the above-mentioned think tank, and would move to Peking University's School of Government "as a result of his interest in academics and sense of responsibility to political studies"<sup>x</sup>. His new tenure as full time scholar suggests that his research on the prospects for democracy in the PRC will move forward and new contributions on this matter may promptly emerge.

Another interesting advocate for political reform who has gained access to the establishment is Han Yunchuan, who less is known in the West compared with Yu

Keping. Han reached the position of professor at the Central Party School's Social Development Research Center, and his main contribution has been the identification in a “*neibu*” article of “five cognitive errors” on the part of the CCP that obstruct political reform.

According to Han Yunchuan, there is a strong and profound belief in the Party’s cadres in (a) the superiority of China’s political system, (b) the need for autocracy at the current developmental stage, (c) the authoritarian nature of Chinese culture, (d) the inevitability of chaos once democracy is implemented, and (e) the inexorable fall apart of China that may result if it democratizes<sup>xii</sup>.

With respect to the first cognitive error born by CCP’s members, Han affirms that it is the most injurious of all, because cadres fail to acknowledge the system’s limitations as well as the strengths of other countries’ systems. Consequently, the supporters of the Chinese political system’s superiority allege that, “as the system is effective, the PRC should not pursue political reform”<sup>xiii</sup>.

As to the second error, Han Yunchuan stresses that those who justify the CCP’s iron grip on power profess that before any patching up of the political system, the Party must transform the economy and culture, because China “is not ready for democracy”<sup>xiv</sup>. Regarding the third cognitive error, Han concedes China’s authoritarian political culture, which is reinforced by interest groups “that struggle to maintain the status quo”<sup>xv</sup>.

With relation to the fourth error, the author states that cadres believe in “moving at too quick a pace could produce chaos”. In addition, democracy is viewed by cadres with suspicion because it is associated with the West and particularly the US’ “subterfuge to trick countries and weaken them to the point of causing their disintegration”<sup>xvi</sup>. Concerning the fifth cognitive error, Han notes that Party members argue that democracy “is not a practicable system for a country composed by fifty-six nationalities”<sup>xvii</sup>.

In his concluding remarks, Han presents his refutation of each cognitive error upheld by CCP’s cadres: firstly, he stresses that in the last decades there is plenty of evidence on the Chinese political system “being surpassed by other countries’ political systems, because all Leninist systems undergo severe institutional dysfunctions”.

Second, Han states that the political domain is intertwined with the economic and cultural domains, so that political reform “would be beneficial for realizing development”. He categorically asserts that “the conditions for implementing thorough political reform are already present”.

Thirdly, the author argues that in order to reverse Chinese traditions inconsistent with democracy, “new practices and institutions should be imported from abroad”. Fourth, Han points out that “society can truly be stable if a fully democratic political system is in place”. Finally, he suggests that the PRC’s “centripetal pull will be strengthened if the political system is liberalized”<sup>xvii</sup>.

The last but not least scholar with a discordant voice whose works are read by the establishment is Xiao Gongqin, a historian from Shanghai Normal University. Xiao considers that a long-term democratization process takes place in the PRC since the late 1970s, composed by five stages, each of which materializes after the previous stage is fulfilled<sup>xviii</sup>.

According to Xiao, the first stage started when Deng Xiaoping launched the reform and opening policy in December 1978 and went on until the crushing of the pro-democracy rebellion in June 1989. The author defines this stage as “romantic and moralistic –and therefore unfavourable for reaching agreements”. However, he argues that activists laid the basis for China’s further democratization, due to their ability to setting political reform on the agenda<sup>xix</sup>.

The second stage began with Deng’s “Southern Tour” in early 1992 (which revived reform after the comeback of the left-wing), and lasted until the end of Jiang Zemin’s mandate as General Secretary of the CCP in late 2002. The author concedes that impressive economic development and the formation of a market economy occurred under “enlightened authoritarian rule”, which contributed to build four preconditions for the advancement of democratization: (a) the rise of a middle class, (b) the emergence of NGOs, (c) the formation of a legal culture, and (d) the consolidation of CCP legitimacy (necessary to implement an orderly political transition when the time comes)<sup>xx</sup>.

The third stage started when Hu Jintao took office between 2002 and 2003, and has not ended yet. On the words of Xiao Gongqin, the main task of this stage is “providing people’s livelihood”, that is to say redistributing wealth and delivering social justice. Such task, according to the author, was not accomplished during the first six years in office of the Hu-Wen administration (Xiao’s book was published in 2009), so “by the time being any attempt of democratize will fail or degenerate into populism”<sup>xxi</sup>.

Even though the fourth stage has yet to begin, Xiao describes it as one period featured by a “robust and effective civil society”. For democracy to succeed, such civil society must contribute with (a) the institutionalization of rule of law, (b) the widespread adoption of a tolerant stance vis-à-vis dissenting opinions, (c) the

granting of full effect to civil rights, and (d) the implementation of gradual political competition (starting experimentally in the wealthier parts of the country)<sup>xxii</sup>.

It should be noted that for Xiao Gongqin “civil society exists in China since the Song dynasty” (960-1279), and it died out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of “warlordism, Japanese invasion, civil war and CCP’s subduing in the Mao era”. Owing to the high level of economic development attained since the early 1990s, “social differentiation and the pluralisation of economic interests have assisted the rebirth of civil society”<sup>xxiii</sup>.

The fifth stage is characterised by the achievement of democracy, although Xiao was reluctant to give many details about how it might look like and the CCP’s situation during that phase. He did, however, argue that Chinese democracy “will come to look a lot like those in other countries with State-led corporatist civil societies (Japan, South Korea, Japan and Singapore)”<sup>xxiv</sup>.

### Concluding remarks

Almost forty years of economic reform have brought enormous changes to Chinese society, to which the political system has mildly adapted. A market oriented economy brings with it a variety of new social roles. When this kind of pluralism is intertwined with inequality, tensions between the state and society arise. Liberal intellectuals in the PRC mostly agree with the idea that ensuing tensions in State-society relations, along with scarce political participation, increase social contradictions.

Increasing tensions signal and call for political change. In today’s China, however, talking about the tensions is problematic because it can be depicted as defying the Party center’s directive to promote harmony. What is more, in the eyes of those CCP’s leaders who averse risk, economic growth might challenge political liberalization because it persuades them that they are doing well with their current approach. Accordingly, they should elude implementing political reform.

The voice of the three analyzed intellectuals is a good signal of (a) plurality amongst the educated cadre and (b) leadership interest in heeding the warnings of scholars. Chinese intellectuals, no matter what political view they adhere, are convinced that the political system must evolve. However, the prospect for political change in China is unclear, because intellectuals do not express unanimity on the question of the PRC’s political trajectory.

The three approaches chosen in this paper conceptualize a diagnosis of current China and the trajectory the CCP should follow to avoid tensions (which might grow into violence and chaos). Their works show that political reform is a means to

assure harmony and stability in society, as well as a tool to ameliorate Chinese institutions, given the dysfunctions suffered by Leninist regimes. Nevertheless, one author pointed out that there is a rooted prejudice in the CCP elite regarding (a) the superiority of China's political system, (b) the need of autocracy to achieve development, and (c) the damage democracy may cause to China's integrity.

With respect to democracy, the authors see it as an unstoppable trend in world history and a tool for realizing development. In their articles it can be observed several remaining tasks to guarantee a solid foundation to democracy: redistributing wealth, delivering social justice and building a robust and effective civil society. They consider that civil society's central contribution must be the establishment of practices and institutions that facilitate rational behaviour and democratic compromise.

For sure the PRC elite are at odds over how best to shape the political system. It certainly is possible that at some point the CCP will resolve that political reform will be needed to reach more economic goals and sustain social stability. One reason triggering this possibility is the development of the contradiction between achieving prosperity and maintaining the Party's control on political power: in the event of economic slowdown, political reform could become a part of the solution.

Many aspects of political reform are related to the rule of law, and struggling against corruption is the latter's paramount tool. That's perhaps why in 2014 the CCP laid out specific requirements on improving the State's legislation on corruption. The fight against corruption not only will give the leadership of the PRC a grip on the construction of a clean government, but also boost China's economy, as the rule of law is the hallmark of a market economy<sup>xxv</sup>.

Corruption is a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon in the PRC: the traditional Chinese faith in "guānxì" (e.g. "connections" or "relationships"), is the most important factor in explaining the continuity and extent of the problem. The main culprits are more evident and ordinary: one-Party rule and state control of the economy. In a one-Party rule state, there is lack of firm checks and balances, which results in the spread of graft and bribery. And state control of resources generates abundant opportunities for corruption<sup>xxvi</sup>.

The thrust towards clean government led by Xi Jinping is the key political change taking place in today's China. In an optimistic scenario, Xi would manage to defeat internal confrontation and move on to expand legal reform. That propitious environment for legal change would produce a gradual political evolution, linked to changing the psychology of bureaucrats<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Therefore, the likeliest scenario will be that constant scrutiny on public servants would make them regard corruption as dangerous (and, perhaps, finally to not even daring to think about it). This, in turn, might gradually switch the omnipotent government of the planned economy era for a guiding government under the rule of law that assumes its duties. Consequently, a major first step towards real democracy will be done, and liberal views on political reform will prove their validity.

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<sup>i</sup> O'BRIEN, Kevin J., "Studying Chinese Politics in an Age of Specialization", *Journal of Contemporary China*, No. 10 issue 71, September 2011, pp. 535-541.

<sup>ii</sup> STALEY, David J. *History and Future: Using Historical Thinking to Imagine the Future*, Lexington Books, Lanham MD, 2007, p. 17.

<sup>iii</sup> BELL, Wendell. *Foundations of Future Studies: History, Purposes and Knowledge, Volume I*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick NJ, 2003, pp. 35-37.

<sup>iv</sup> DIAMOND, Larry, "China and East Asia Democracy: The Coming Wave", *Journal of Democracy*, No. 23 (I), January 2012, pp. 5-13.

<sup>v</sup> LYNCH, Daniel, "Envisioning China's Political Future: Elite Responses to Democracy as a Global Constitutive Norm", *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 51 (3), September 2007, pp. 701-722.

<sup>vi</sup> LYNCH, Daniel C., *China's Futures: PRC Elites Debate Economics, Politics and Foreign Policy*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2015, pp. 75-76.

<sup>vii</sup> It was a 1,800 characters work published by the People's Daily. Despite the catchy title of the article, Yu made several unoriginal points about democracy. However, the article's reproduction in the CCP's official newspaper contributed to its broad circulation, which in turn helped Yu to publish further and elude the censorship of his liberal ideas.

<sup>viii</sup> YU Keping, "Shehui Gongping he Shanzhi shi Jianshe Hexie Shehuide Liangkuai Jishi" ["Social Justice and Good Governance are the Two Pillars on which to Build a Harmonious Society"], *Lilun Dongtai [Theoretical Trends]*, No. 1658, January 10, 2005, pp. 1-12.

<sup>ix</sup> YU Keping, "Mingzhu Zhengzhi Gaige Diyu Gongzhong Yuqi" ["Political Reform Is Not Up to Public Expectations"], in Renmin Luntan Zazhi (ed.) *Shijie Da Qushi yu Weilai 10 Nian Zhongguo Mianlinde Tiaozhan [World Megatrends and Challenges China Will Face in the Coming Decade]*, Chang'an Chubanshe, Beijing, 2010, pp. 156-158.

<sup>x</sup> "Chinese author of 'Democracy is a Good Thing' resigns from Communist Party bureau" in *South China Morning Post* web edition, 28 October 2015

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(<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1873493/chinese-author-democracy-good-thing-resigns-communist>). Retrieved 23 April 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> HAN Yuanchuan, “Fang’ai Zhengti Gaigede Renshi Wuqu” [Cognitive Errors that Block Thorough Reform], *Gaige Neican* [Internal Reference Materials on Reform], No. 26, 2009, pp. 15-18.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>xviii</sup> XIAO Gongqin, *Zhongguode Da Zhanxing: Cong Fazhan Zhengzhixue Kan Zhongguo Biange* [China’s Grand Transformation: Looking at China’s Changes from the Perspective of Political Development Studies], Xinxing Chubanshe, Beijing, 2009, p. 120.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>xxv</sup> MALENA, Jorge E., “The Evolution of the PRC’s Legal System: the Building of the Rule of Law, its Resemblance with the Concept of Socialist Constitutionalism. Possible Mid-term Scenarios”, paper presented in the *6th World Forum on China Studies*, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (November 20-21, 2015).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.