Party-State Democracy: A Theoretical Exploration*

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The outcome of the Thirteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may be ambiguous and uncertain in many respects, but the Congress was decisive in two important matters.

First, the official commitment to political and economic reform has been confirmed. The idea of an "initial stage of socialism" stretching for one hundred years has cleared the ideological space for a reformist regime, and the programmatic elements of reform that have emerged in a zigzag crescendo since 1977 have been summarized and advanced. Although the credit for the official affirmation of reform should go to Teng Hsiao-p'ing, Chao Tzu-yang, and other high leaders, the tumultuous politics of 1987 have made it clear that the reform trend is not simply dependent on this or that leader. At the present time, the "conservatives" do not have an alternative vision for mainland China, and while they might modify the pace, they cannot set the political direction.

Secondly, the framework of politics in mainland China will remain the party-state led by the CCP. The political hegemony of the CCP was explicitly affirmed by Chao Tzu-yang and the possibility of a multi-party system explicitly denied. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the strength of the party's control and its unwillingness to consider sharing control was demonstrated by the conservative reaction to the movement to reform political structures (cheng-chih t'i-chih kai-ke) in 1986 and to the ensuing student demonstrations. In my opinion, it is unrealistic to imagine the CCP being forced to yield or to share its hegemonic position (excluding for the moment the very special and territorially limited cases of


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"one country, two systems" arrangements). The modalities of party hegemony are of course a major topic of reform, and such reforms will affect the discretion and hence the power of the party. Nevertheless, the party-state structure will remain axiomatic for the foreseeable future.

While it is clear that both reform and party hegemony will remain important components of mainland China’s path into the twenty-first century, their implications for democratization in mainland China’s politics are more problematic. If we assume that the party-state is inherently undemocratic, then continued reform will either strengthen the current structure by increasing public satisfaction, or provoke a crisis by stimulating extra-party societal forces. So one would project either a political taming of reform, or a crisis with the party as the probable victor. But the assumption that the party-state is inherently undemocratic is pivotal for either of these expectations, and that assumption deserves more serious examination than it has received hitherto. Certainly, a Chinese state dominated by the CCP will not become a parliamentary state in which a variety of political parties contend for power on an equal basis. But if we hypothesize a situation in which the party-state would respect citizen rights, incorporate newly emerging societal forces, and shape policy and personnel in accordance with public preferences, then there would be no necessary contradiction between democratizing reform and party hegemony.

The purpose of this paper is not to explore the likelihood of party-state democratization in mainland China. That would involve too much speculation about the future. Rather, the question at hand is to ask if party-state democracy is possible in theory, and, if so, what would it entail. This is no easy task. We are familiar with the characteristics of parliamentary democracy, and we are also familiar with the authoritarian excesses of party-states. To consider party-state democracy we must ask if there is a meaning of democracy more general than the characteristics of parliamentary states. We must also consider the possibility that the party-state could have a future quite different from its past. These questions disturb assumptions that are very convenient, and answering them requires quite a bit of heavy theoretical work. But without asking these questions the conceptual foundations of our interpretation of Chinese politics remain unexplored and untested, and we do not know if we build on sand or stone.

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Parliamentary Democracy

The characteristics of parliamentary democracy. The common notion of democracy in the noncommunist world — and among a good part of the intellectuals and people in the communist world — involves the attributes of a parliamentary state. Thus, one expects a political situation in which the legislature is the decisive rule-maker for the state; in which there are a number of political parties, and more political parties can be formed; in which elections are free and fair; and in which the citizens have a number of political and other rights which are not easily suspended by authorities. The notion of democracy as parliamentary democracy — or as liberal democracy, as it is sometimes called — is not intended as a substitute for the older, philosophical idea of democracy as the power of the people. Rather, it is commonly believed that, at least in the modern world, the parliamentary form of government is the only way that the interests of the citizens and their control over public authority can be secured. This belief was shaken in the first half of the twentieth century by the challenges of communism and fascism, but it emerged with reconfirmed confidence after the excesses of Stalin and Hitler demonstrated the bankruptcy of challengers. Although no one would claim that any existing parliamentary regime is a perfect democracy, the popular legitimacy of such regimes is impossible to deny.

If we reflect on the features of parliamentary democracy that account for its democratic character, they could perhaps be grouped into three types. The first relate to what might be called the “market democracy” aspects of parliamentary states. The primary function of the state is legislative, and every aspect of the legislative process is based on citizen competition. The state’s claim to popular sovereignty rests on the primacy of a citizen-based legislature. The natural decision rule is that of majority rule, because anything else would imply an unacceptable inequality of political standing. The preservation of the openness of the legislature to citizen influence requires the continual exposure of persons and parties in power to the risk of losing power as a result of legislative votes and citizen elections. Moreover, the citizen not only has the option of existing electoral alternatives but is able to organize additional alternatives. Competition is open in principle.

Of course, the dynamics of market competition may work to restrict the actual range of alternatives. Candidates have a tendency
to slide toward the middle of the political spectrum and to become virtually indistinguishable, and the video orientation of the contemporary electorate may give inordinate weight to the candidates' "image" and financing. However, regardless of whether voter preferences are optimized, the fate of politicians and policies clearly lie in their hands. And regardless of whether political parties are democratic in their internal structure, they are required by the electoral market to be oriented toward voter preferences.

The second category of democratic features are those that stabilize the relationship of the state with the citizenry and with the society. The most obvious of these is the constitution, but the constitution is only the centerpiece of a generally limited scope of public activities. Civil society exists as an autonomous entity and is in some respects prior to the state. The democratic utility of the defined and limited state is that it lowers society's vulnerability to state action. By the same token, of course, it limits the capacity of the citizenry as a whole to reshape its societal environment.

The third category of features is that of citizen rights. Basic legal and political rights of citizens are essential to popular sovereignty; majority rule and open elections would seem to presume universal citizenship. Nevertheless, citizen rights have been rather slow in developing to their contemporary range. Universal manhood suffrage became established in Europe between 1848 and 1920, and welfare rights continue to develop from their beginnings in the late nineteenth century. Citizen rights are far more important for the democratic character of parliamentary regimes than simply establishing a "one person one vote" basis for the state. By creating zones of immunity from state action, as well as claims to due process and state resources, the citizen is strengthened in his or her individual relationship to state bureaucracy. This strengthens the power of the people in their relationship to their own state.

If we summarize the democratic attributes of the parliamentary state, we find that "the power of the people" has a quite special meaning. It does not really function as "the government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented," as John Stuart Mill once described it. Instead, the limits of the state, vis-à-vis society and vis-à-vis the individual citizen, are as important to its democratic character as citizen participation. Indeed, one could argue that the importance of electoral competition and majority rule are not really that the preferences of the entire citizenry are directly realized, but that the preferences of individual citizens can be
expressed and the continual threat of elections keeps the elite, the agenda-setters, and the leaders anxiously oriented toward the public. One might say that the public has employed the stratagem of "divide and rule" toward its rulers.

The limits of parliamentary democracy. As a political model parliamentary democracy is limited in two important respects. The first is the extent to which it is the product of unique historical and cultural circumstances. If parliamentary democracy is rooted in a special social environment, then it can no more be a model for others than Saudi oil wealth can be a model solution to someone else's energy crisis. The other limit lies in the political predispositions of a parliamentary structure. The social and policy conservatism of parliamentary regimes, for instance, might be more appropriate in some national situations than in others.

The historical uniqueness of Western parliamentary institutions has been argued very forcefully by the German historian Otto Hintze.\(^1\) He claims that three conditions unique to the West were vital to the development of parliamentary institutions: feudalism's system of contracts and privileges; the division between the church and state of sacred and secular power; and international rivalry among the European states. One could add to Hintze's argument that the democratization of European representative institutions took place in the unusually favorable environment of world leadership in the commercial and industrial revolutions. Although democratization was a hard-fought battle in Europe into the twentieth century, the struggles took place in a context that was accustomed to limited government, in which wealth and prosperity were increasing, and in which the national context was not skewed by great dependency or vulnerability to other countries.

It is hard to imagine a place more lacking in these preconditions than Imperial China. As Jacques Gernet put it recently,

Seen from China, the political history of the West appears altogether original, and one might even say exotic. By this I mean that it in no wise constitutes a norm by which the history and the principles of organization of all societies should be judged. For not only are the institutions, with their particular mechanisms, different, but our notions, our patterns of thought, and even the idea of man that we

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have forged in the course of our historical experience differ from those of China.²

Despite the obvious importance of favorable environmental factors for the development of parliamentary democracy in Europe, it would be hasty to conclude that it could not spread beyond the circle of nations enjoying these preconditions. For one thing, other political traditions might include elements that might also prove compatible with democracy. This is roughly the argument made by Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph about Indian politics in their well-known book, *The Modernity of Tradition*. More importantly, a modern social economy in which urbanization and commodity-based relations of production have created a vastly more complex material base for politics has become worldwide. In these current circumstances, regardless of cultural or historical traditions, a government that limits its interventions in society and is bound and shaped by citizen decisions would seem to be the most appropriate form of government. Of course, there may be different articulations of modern democratic government, and here cultural and historical heritage would still play an important role.

The second limitation of parliamentary democracy as a model concerns its political predispositions. The parliamentary state is a state which is responsive to the current constellation of forces in society and to the current demands of the active citizenry. On the one hand, its procedures require both leadership and policy to be responsive to voters. On the other hand, the limitations of the parliamentary state, especially societal and constitutional limitations, prevent the state from leading society. Parliamentary politics aggregates demands which are already present in society; it does not pose autonomous challenges of its own. While this demand-driven posture is perhaps appropriate in advanced industrial democracies, it is less satisfactory in developing countries.

The parliamentary state is an inherently conservative structure for two reasons. First, it preempts revolutionary pressures through its basic openness to citizen input. It is open, at least hypothetically, to any public interest that can build a majority. Unpopular officials can be removed, and unpopular policies can be changed. So people have their vote to lose, rather than simply their chains, in a revolu-

tion. Micro-revolutions in policy and personnel occur constantly and reduce pressure and alienation. The exceptions to this rule are cases like Northern Ireland where an organized minority is alienated from the majority and therefore sees no hope of its interests being served, and cases like South Africa where a group of whatever size is excluded from citizenship.

Secondly, parliamentary states tend to be conservative because wealthy and powerful individuals and organizations are free to exert whatever influence they can on public decision-making. As numerous observers of American politics have pointed out, for instance, the wealth and power of business interests in the United States limits the scope and ideology of American politics to a range that does not threaten those interests. This is not to say that a parliamentary state is necessarily bourgeois, but that its default orientation and values are set by established societal interests. I would expect that a parliamentary state in a socialist or mixed political economy would respond to a different set of established societal interests.

The Party-State and Democracy

Party-state vanguardism. Nothing could be further from the ideal or the reality of a communist party-state than parliamentary democracy as described above. Instead of market democracy, there is the dictatorship of the proletariat. A vanguard party monopolizes political leadership in the name of a class rather than on the basis of citizenship. Instead of a state limited by society, the party-state penetrates every aspect of society, and every aspect of society must justify itself in terms of the common state purpose. Instead of providing citizen rights protected by procedural guarantees, the party-state assumes that it serves the interests of the masses. The “people” of the People’s Republic of China is a political concept, not one of universal citizenship.

The party-state is a very strong public structure based on the party’s monumental self-confidence in its vanguard political role. It does not permit the formation of truly autonomous interest groups; instead, party leadership is pervasive in all organizations. Within the party, the principles of party discipline and of democratic

centralism prevent internal party politics from emulating market democracy. Factions cannot be open and opposition is not legitimate. The party-state claims to promote the welfare of the masses and it justifies its rule by touting its accomplishments, but it controls very tightly the public judgment of its performance and prohibits the articulation of alternatives.

The rationale for this monopolistic and monolithic structure is that it concentrates the entire force of society in order to move it as rapidly as possible to a better future. This rationale makes several important assumptions: that there is a path in history which can be known in advance; that the party knows the path and is single-mindedly dedicated to its historic responsibility; and that social progress depends on "scientifically correct" leadership rather than on a reciprocal responsiveness between leadership and citizenry. The people are the masters in a vanguardist system in the same sense that the sheep are the masters of the shepherd: their interests are supposed to control the shepherd’s behavior. This is the ideological core of vanguardism.

If one accepts these assumptions, then there is no need for interest aggregation or a public legislative process because policy is fundamentally future-oriented rather than present-oriented. Current social demands and needs are important in that they set the constraints of policy, but they do not set policy direction. Moreover, the party should not share or restrict its political leadership. Like the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church, the party’s legitimacy would be threatened rather than enhanced by the existence of competing organizations or of an irresponsible, loyal opposition. It is correctness rather than approval by a constituency that is the basis of its claim to rule. Finally, the historical goal is a situation of material abundance and the victory of world revolution, it is not the education of the citizenry of self-leadership. The party’s role is vanguard rather than tutelary. The party withers away only when state does.

Until the 1960s, the party-state ideology just sketched was generally accepted in the communist world. Then political experimentation and ideological innovation began to undermine the Leninist framework. In 1961 Khrushchev declared that the dictatorship of the proletariat had been replaced by a “state of the whole people,” a change which scandalized the CCP. The development of socialist humanism in Eastern Europe stressed the human basis of socialism and criticized alienation and authoritarianism. Finally,
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Brezhnev's concept of "developed socialism" in effect abandoned the idea that policy should be guided by the goal of communism and said that society's goals emerge from society's needs. In no case was the party-state structure abandoned, but its ideological premises had been severely shaken.

In the leftist period from 1957 to 1977, mainland China had a most painful experience of the problems of the excessively strong party-state. The Great Leap Forward was not only a man-made disaster for the most part, it was a disaster of a magnitude that could only have been achieved by an exceptionally strong, totalistic state. The Cultural Revolution was the ultimate demonstration that the cure of leftism was not more leftism. One might say that the CCP was caught in a "high level authority trap." Since it claimed responsibility and rightful control over all of society, its own failures led to societal crises that led in turn to further tightening of control. At Mao's death the institutions of the party-state were firmly in place, but the naive belief in its justifying ideology had been destroyed.

Politics of the post-Mao period has followed what Professor Tang Tsou has called a "middle road."* The road has wavered, but it has stayed within certain ideological and institutional boundaries. Ideologically, the field of discussion is defined by a commitment to modernization and the open door policy on the one hand and the "Four Fundamental Principles" (the socialist road, leadership of the CCP, dictatorship of the proletariat, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Tse-tung Thought) on the other. Institutionally, the regime has on the one hand encouraged a broad range of activities and reforms aimed at providing more popular input and restricting arbitrariness, while on the other sharply curtailing initiatives that suggest political pluralism. There are no apparent limits to the willingness to consider "in-house" reform of the party-state, but even reformers like Chao Tzu-yang oppose changes that would suggest a drift to a parliamentary state.

In the meantime, the implicit justification of the party-state has shifted significantly. The historical justification of leading the country to communism has all but disappeared. Chao Tzu-yang's thesis that an "initial stage of socialism" will last one hundred years is clearly intended to take the pressure of Marxist historical dog-

matism off of current policy-making, but it weakens the justification for the party’s vanguard role. The party still wants to move society as quickly as possible, but the new goal is modernization, one of which the party cannot claim a privileged understanding. Moreover, the methods of leadership have shifted from class struggle and mass mobilization to market controls and material interest — again, methods not unique to the CCP. And the goal of modernization is one much closer to current social needs and popular consciousness than is the goal of communism.

The implications of the redefined leadership role of the party for its legitimation are profound. Vanguardism was justified as service to the people’s long-term interest of which only the CCP had scientific knowledge. Modernizing leadership requires the encouragement of an increasingly complex and sophisticated society, a greater stress on contract and market activities, and more flexible policy-making open to the influence of expertise and to the public in general. Such features are precisely the strong points of parliamentary democracy, whereas the party-state was built on the vanguardist ideology. So the question of this paper is posed again in somewhat different form: can party-state vanguardism be transformed into party-state democracy?

Defining party-state democracy. The main problem of the party-state from the point of view of popular control, that is, from the point of view of democracy in its most general meaning, is that its premise that it represents mass interests prevents any structural or procedural guarantees of popular interests or control. All authority flows down and out from the party center; any attempt from below to influence authority must rely on the democratic work-style of the power-holders rather than on guaranteed procedures or rights, and any opposition is likely to be interpreted as counterrevolutionary opposition, because no other form of opposition is allowed. Theoretically, insofar as the party and its policies are popular, then this system is simply more efficient and muscular than cumbersome democratic procedures. Insofar as the party identifies and pursues goals which are not popular at the time but turn out to be beneficial, then this system is more effective. But insofar as the party, its policies, and its officials are not popular, this system provides no recourse. And, because of the high level authority trap mentioned earlier, the failure of policy and personnel is likely to lead to a more oppressive and lower quality leadership.

The defects of party-state vanguardism are more vivid if we
contrast them to the generalized advantages of parliamentary democracy described earlier. First, there is no ultimate popular control over personnel and policy through mechanisms which give a choice to the citizenry. The party-state is an executive state rather than a legislative state, and elections and citizen participation in general are aimed at affirming and propagating policies rather than creating them. Secondly, there are no firm limits of governmental power over society or of party control over the government and other public organizations. Even as Chao Tzu-yang attempted to separate government and party functions at the Thirteenth Party Congress, his assignment of policy and personnel control to the party left the party inextricably and powerfully involved in all public affairs. It would seem that the separation of party and state means only a distinguishing of functions, much like one could distinguish neural functions from other bodily functions. The separation of state from society and the regulation of the state-society relationship is even less far advanced. Thirdly, citizen rights are at a low level of development. Although there is a greater scope of permitted activities in mainland China than ever before, there is little protection against abuse of power. On a more basic level, the definition of the PRC as a class-based society, as a dictatorship of the proletariat, creates a fundamental inequality of standing among citizens, and puts a powerful weapon for invidious distinctions in the hands of authorities.

Given these weaknesses, what would party-state democracy require? As David Goodman has argued, the general process of re legitimization began in 1978, and democratization has been an essential, if problematic, aspect of post-Mao politics. But at what point does democratizing progress become "party-state democracy"? In my opinion, the fundamental requirement would be a change in the party's idea of "service to the people" from that of vanguard service to that of modern democratic service, from closed politics to open politics. This would imply that if the popularity of party rule is challenged, the challenge should be decided by more formal democratic procedures rather than by more exercise of power. In other words, if the party's premise of popularity does not

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