

CHINESE DEMOCRACY, 1954-1966

Andrew Paquin

Abstract

This essay began as an investigation of the fate of democracy during the Cultural Revolution. In order to establish how Chinese democracy was changed during this upheaval, it first of all had to be determined how far Chinese democracy was in place before the Cultural Revolution. As my research into this question developed, it became obvious that this was an extended essay in itself. Hence this essay sets out to explore how far the theoretical model of Chinese democracy was in place by 1966.

A theoretical basis is given in which the role of the “vanguard party” is discussed and more importantly, the idea of democratic centralism is introduced. This latter concept is central to the essay, as the extent of its existence decides how far democracy was in place in China.

The history of the period is then compared with this theoretical model, by looking at the major problems which confronted democracy. These problems can be split into three broad categories. Firstly, there is the inherent problem of Confucianism,

Andrew Paquin is at Harvard College. A native of New Zealand, he wrote this IB Extended Essay for Mr. Barry Drake at Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong, in the 1995/1996 academic year.

because of which Chinese people were brought up to believe in the danger of criticising superiors. Secondly, there are the self-created problems after the Communist Revolution in 1949. These are largely related to factors inhibiting the effectiveness of democratic centralism. The ramifications of the decrepit nature of the system were very serious as the essay outlines—particularly in the realm of economic campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward, which had disastrous results for the Chinese people. This outcome is linked to the failings of democratic centralism. Lastly there is the influence of Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Communist Party. Mao was responsible for creating a society in which it was impossible to articulate opinions outside of the Maoist doctrine. Thus criticism was futile, which had adverse affects on democracy.

China may well have practised centralism in this period. However, because of the nature of the above problems, this essay concludes that it was not democratic centralism which China had in place.



Introduction

“...democracy, and indeed any other theory of political rule, cuts across ideological boundaries.”¹ Andrew Heywood’s statement is crucial for the premise of this essay to be accepted. As will be illustrated, within a Western paradigm it is easy to discard the Chinese political system as entirely undemocratic. Yet, this would be confining the concept of democracy within certain ideological parameters, and thus for the purpose of this essay a wider definition shall be used. Democracy is “a description of a particular system of government and the distribution of power within it,”² while “in reality there is no single agreed conception ...but rather a number of rival models, each claiming to be true democracy.”³ The Chinese political system is one of these ‘rival models.’ This essay sets out to explore how far the theoretical model of Chinese democracy was in place by 1966. However, even

within the Chinese paradigm of democracy there have been many problems with its implementation. It will be demonstrated that these problems have been such that democracy in China was practically non-existent during the period 1954 to 1966. Any existence at all would have been subject to a definition which could meet only minimal criteria for what democracy means.

Theoretical Basis of Chinese Democracy

In order to properly support the conclusions made at the end of this essay, a theoretical base must be established of the various paradigms that are being discussed. When analysing the various models of democracy which all claim to be its true form, the most fundamental separation that exists between Western liberal models and Eastern socialist models lies in the quest for 'liberty' and 'equality.' Western democracies, since the cries heard during the French Revolution of "*Liberte! Egalite!*" have sought both. Yet, absolute equality has been sacrificed for individual liberty. The equality being referred to in the West is, more accurately, equality of opportunity, not of outcome. Individuals in Western societies are at liberty to increase their material worth, creating financial and social inequality as a result.

Following the teachings of Karl Marx, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 met the problem of equality by nationalising property and industry. Yet Marx had not elaborated on what kind of political system would oversee these vast changes, other than a 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' The leader of the Bolsheviks, V.I. Lenin, developed what seemed to him a pragmatic application of what Marx had taught, which came to form the cornerstone of the Chinese political system.

One of the greatest differences between Marx and Lenin was that Lenin did not believe the Revolution would be spontaneous and without leaders. Rather, the Revolution would be led by a "vanguard party,"⁴ the leaders of which would be, like himself, the most "class-conscious elements amongst the proletariat."⁵ This

faith in the Party leaders is the crucial part of “Leninist democracy” to acknowledge when considering the chosen period of Chinese history.

The following principles are fundamental to Leninist “democracy” and were adopted by the Chinese. “Firstly, democracy requires a monopolistic party which in China is the Chinese Communist Party, for it is this party that represents the working masses. Secondly, this party should be the ruling party and should ‘lead and guide’ both government and society unchallenged. Thirdly, the party itself should conform to the principles of democratic centralism; party members should be able to discuss policy openly and freely, but also be prepared to unite behind an agreed party line. In theory, this was achieved by a system in which each organ within the party elected members of higher organs and was able to make recommendations to them. Defeated minorities were obliged to accept the will of the majority and the decisions of higher organs within the party were binding on those below.”⁶

The most important word in the statement above is “party” for it is set down in the Chinese Constitution that the Party “is the core of leadership of the whole Chinese people”⁷ and that “the working class exercises leadership over the state through its vanguard, the Communist Party of China.”⁸ The government of the state, which is a separate body from the Party, does not therefore have the decision-making power that governments in the West assume, but rather concerns itself with carrying out the policy of the Party. “This means...that the governmental institutions in China exist to serve the party.”⁹ This is the basis of the Chinese democracy as set down in the 1954 Constitution. From a Western point of view, one might be left wondering, “What do the Chinese vote for? How are the people *represented*?” The answer to this is contained in the idea of democratic centralism, where each organ selects higher organs. Thus it is through a series of representations that the people at the lowest level influence decisions made at the top and the people who make them.

In China this system has four levels: 1. The central organisations, 2. The provincial and autonomous regional

organisations, 3. The *xian* (county) or district organisations and 4, the basic primary organisations—Party branches in schools, factories, and communes.¹⁰ This is the theoretical model against which the reality of the period shall be compared, by looking at the problems which confronted democracy.

Confucianism—An Inherent Problem

The Constitution of 1954 dictates that “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of procession and freedom of demonstration.”¹¹ These are rights which are inherent in a Western model of democracy, which historically developed out of the ideas of liberalism. The adoption of these values has been, and still is, an on-going process. For the Chinese this was not the case. Rather than being the result of a prolonged search for an ideal society, China was expected to suddenly embrace the above precepts as outlined by the document created in 1954. The immediate problem with this aspiration was the historical/philosophical impediment presented by Confucianism. This can be seen as an inherent problem as it was an aspect of Chinese society well in place many centuries before the Revolution in 1949. The democratic centralism China had committed to contains the word ‘democratic’ in its title, because even though the centralist system sends decisions down through the hierarchy, advice and influence are supposed to flow up. When decisions that come from the Executive are misinformed or disputable, this reverse flow of influence becomes criticism. However, the Chinese have had it instilled in them that criticising superiors is unwise and dangerous. This concept precedes the Communist Revolution of 1949, throughout the centuries when the binding force in Chinese society was Confucianism. This is important to discuss, for some analysts point to Confucianism as a set of ideas that has never left the Chinese and that may even be increasing in influence in contemporary society.

Within the parameters of the Confucian way of life, one of the most important aspects is the five relationships which guide social interaction. Apart from the relationship between friend and friend, all are based on there being a superior and an inferior. For example, father to his son, or most importantly, emperor to his subjects. An order given to someone from a superior was irrefutable. This gave such a person as the emperor absolute power. Yet it was power which was not supposed to be abused, for the superior was obliged to take care of those under him. Thus the concept of centralism as a form of government would not be a difficult translation to make, nor the concept of one infallible party controlling this system. What would be difficult to comprehend is the addition of democracy and active participation in the running of centralist *democracy*. This outlook that is instilled in the Chinese people was a problem that also faced the democracy movement of the early twentieth century.

Problems after 1954

The first ten years of Communism manipulated this attitude and may have even compounded it, which could only be to the detriment of democracy. In 1956 the Chinese leadership initiated the “One Hundred Flowers Campaign” with the slogan “Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.”¹² The reasoning behind the campaign was that the Chinese people could speak out about the Party so that it could improve itself. With the promise that there would be no repercussions for the criticisms made, many people took the opportunity to criticise the Party, its policies and even socialism itself. This type of criticism and especially the extent of criticism which emerged was not expected by the government, and their response was to launch the anti-rightist movement. This involved quotas being set for the number of rightists which must be rounded up by local authorities, which effectively became the cleansing of any elements opposing government policies. This sudden reversal of policy was justified on the grounds that although the land redistri-

bution laws had eliminated the material imbalances in society, nevertheless, “bourgeois *attitudes*”¹³ still remained which needed to be expunged. Writers such as Mu Fu-Sheng speak of the profound effect this had on the Chinese in their preparedness to challenge the Party. The harsh crackdown in the anti-rightist campaign sent a clear message to the Chinese people not to directly challenge the Party. Not only was the campaign itself a direct contradiction of the theory behind the Chinese democracy, but it had the consequence of limiting the future implementation of the centralist system to merely a descent of orders from high to low, essentially a one-way street.

Another aspect of the anti-rightist campaign was that it targeted intellectuals, as it was the intellectuals who saw the problems of the new Chinese People’s Republic, and articulated their views. The ramification of this targeting was that there was no longer any component in society to act as the social watchdog. China had no other party of any strength, nor did it have a free press. China’s only newspaper which reached anything near all those who were literate was the *People’s Daily*, which was, and still is, the government newspaper. Viewed in the light of a Western paradigm for democracy it becomes impossible from this point on to accept China’s system as a democracy.

The question that needs to be asked is can the term democracy be justified in any sense, when applied to China? With the awareness of the problems that democracy has had since the Revolution in 1949, it is the thesis of this essay, as stated above, that a Western form of democracy, which grants that people have certain freedoms by right, has not been present in China. Only a form which sees democracy as a means of facilitating the running of government could have actually been in place. This can be called Chinese democracy. Yet, there have also been problems with the workings of this more limited definition.

Ramifications of a decrepit system

As the new Communist state came into existence after 1949, policies needed to be implemented quickly in order for China to deal with the great economic and social problems it was facing. Prices had increased by as much as 85,000 times¹⁴ at the end of the Nationalist regime, leaving the new Communist government no time to concern itself with the finer points of Marxism. In fact, great economic progress was made, and by 1952 production had reached peak pre-1949 levels.¹⁵ It was in this environment of success that the first Constitution of the PRC was drafted in 1954. Yet, the driving force behind the political changes was the wish for economic prosperity, as opposed to a fervent belief in socialist democracy. As this essay will show, this is one of the greatest problems that faced, and still faces, the Chinese in the development of their political system.

Out of the success of these initial years, the Chinese Communist Party was able to create an image for itself of infallibility, which is crucial in the upholding of their Constitution. That many people embraced this notion is understandable. China was just emerging from a long Civil War, and thus any actions taken which brought stability would be welcomed. What's more, after June 1950 the Government undertook a massive land reform program, under the Agrarian Reform Law which set out to abolish the "land ownership system of feudal exploitation."¹⁶ This program, which will be further discussed later, touched the lives of effectively all Chinese. "On the whole, the land revolution favoured the poor peasants and the hired hands..."¹⁷ The 'poor peasants' constituted by far the majority of the Chinese population, which created a huge base of followers/believers for the government. These peasants were encouraged to "speak bitterness"¹⁸ in order to denounce their landlords, and yet the infallibility of the Party was not questionable. This submission to authority obviously has close ties to Confucianism which at this time still shaped the way many people thought, and expected things to be.

Thus it was expected that the CCP act as the “vanguard party,” yet there were inherent problems that being in this position entailed. Theoretically, the CCP executive would hear voices of those in tiers below them. The decisions made by the executive would then be based on their own ideas and also the influences from below. Yet, as Witold Rodzinski pointed out: “The Party becomes singularly vulnerable to the danger of deformation through its monopolistic position.”¹⁹ Essentially it was very easy for those in the Executive, such as the Standing Committee, not to hear those below them.

Perhaps this was a necessary sacrifice of individual liberty in order to perpetuate policies which would bring China towards equality. However, this justification can only be made with the understanding that this would not be equality of poverty. The acceptance of a “pragmatic” definition of democracy such as that made above, would have to be judged by the success of the economic policies which arise out of this more authoritarian rule. For if the people’s lives are not improving, then they have sacrificed their liberty for an economic equality which does not arrive.

Was this the case in China? As stated there was an initial period of economic success, but this was not indicative of the whole period, as the Great Leap Forward illustrates. This was a mass campaign which commenced just after the beginning of the 2nd Five Year Plan, in 1958. It was the brainchild of the Chairman of the CCP, Mao Zedong, and came as an alternative model for economic development. “Its emphasis was on higher levels of collectivisation... organising China’s population to take the place of expensive equipment...[and] the importance of political thought for greater productivity.”²⁰ Quotas were set for production in such industries as steel, electricity and coal. “Buoyed by optimism, the exuberant planners repeatedly revised the production targets upwards...”²¹ In order to meet the demands set by the quotas ‘backyard furnaces’ sprung up across China, for the production of steel. Yet no guidelines were given as to the quality of the product made nor where the raw material was to come from. Thus metal fences, pots, pans and even metal antiquities were

melted down, to make steel that was mostly “unusable.”²² Because of the commune system which was introduced, agricultural production was largely collectivised. The situation that developed became known as the Big Lie, as “Cadres who were desperate to escape criticism and to advance their careers filed fraudulent record growth reports.”²³ The inflated statistics of production were widely published, and led people to believe they would be provided for. In fact, the reverse happened and the central government, unaware of the discrepancies, set quotas even higher, “and cadres in turn pushed the peasants until they refused to comply, or collapsed.”²⁴ The result of this lying and mismanagement “was famine on a gigantic scale, a famine that claimed 20 million lives or more between 1959 and 1962.”²⁵

This disaster brings to light the consequences of the governmental hierarchy being immune from influence from below. If the centralist system was operating as it was supposed to, then the news that statistics were inflated and that the ‘backyard furnace’ programme was decrepit, could have passed up through the hierarchy much sooner than it actually did.

What needs to be examined is how this system failed. Can a centralist system accommodate democracy? The CCP’s view on this question is outlined in a speech given by Liu Shao-Chi when the first constitution was drafted in 1954. He said:

No important affairs of state are to be determined by a single person or small number of persons. Since the people’s congresses are instituted as the basic political system of our country, all important questions must be submitted to them for discussion and decision. Important questions affecting the whole nation must be decided upon by the National People’s Congress, or by its Standing Committee when the NPA is not in session.²⁶

The consequences of this not working are severe, as Gregory Chow pointed out: “Mistakes by a single political leader in a centrally planned economy can lead to national economic disaster”²⁷ of which the ‘Great Leap Forward’ was an example. However, Liu goes on to defend the centralist system itself:

A reactionary publication in HK asserted that our “system of people’s congresses is a system of concentration of power by the central

authority.” These reactionaries seem to think they have found something to attack us with. However, we Marxist-Leninists have long since publicly declared that we stand for centralism. The question is, what kind of centralism—the despotic centralism of a handful of big feudal lords and capitalists, or the democratic centralism of the masses of the people of the working class? These two systems of centralism are poles apart. In the draft constitution, we have combined a high degree of centralism with a high degree of democracy.²⁸

Mao Zedong and Chinese Democracy

The important claim is that decisions in China are not made from an elite at the top operating independently. In theory this is how Lenin saw centralist democracy as operating, which has definite parallels to Plato’s ideal of benign “Philosopher Kings” in his *Republic*. However this comparison begins to fail when the history of China’s recent leadership is examined.

“During that period (1954-1974), the system was implemented half-heartedly and was not in operation for eight years during the Cultural Revolution...”²⁹ In this excerpt from a speech given by Dr. Victor Sit, a general analysis is made of the implementation of China’s political system. According to Dr. Victor Sit, during the Cultural Revolution these problems were “largely because of the dictatorship of Mao Zedong,”³⁰ his implication being that Mao only moved into the dictatorial position after 1966. However, Mao’s influence before the dawning of the Cultural Revolution already had certain negative ramifications for democracy. This influence can be shown in the concept of Maoist ‘Discourse’ as outlined by Mobo C.F. Gao in his article on that subject. He defines discourse as “the paradigm in which knowledge and power join together,”³¹ and Maoist Discourse “was a channel through which knowledge in the widest sense was formed and discharged. It was a framework within which the Chinese made sense of their lives.”³² However, it was not possible to operate outside of this framework, as it “does not, as ideology does, *imply* that there is something that is non-ideological, something ‘real,’

‘true,’ or ‘correct.’ Discourse does not allow for a reality beneath the surface.”³³ The consequences of this were serious, for it severely limits what is possible to express as thoughts, or speech. As Gao states: “Mao’s opponents were powerless because they could not operate out of Maoist discourse. Since they had to challenge within the framework of Maoist discourse, they were bound to be impotent.”³⁴

The effect this had on democratic centralism was that it further compounded the difficulties of the reverse flow of influence from bottom to top of the hierarchy. Only views which agreed with the party line would be able to travel the centralist line within the discourse. Criticism thus becomes either difficult or impossible, as shown once again by the treatment of intellectuals. “The autonomy of intellectuals was meaningful only to the extent that it served the cause. If not, it should be crushed, and rightly so.”³⁵

The term “crushed” most often meant in practice that dissenters were ‘brain-washed’ or ‘ideologically reformed’. This is a process based on “Pavlov’s Theory that environmental conditioning can alter human will and remould the character of the individual.”³⁶ In China there were special camps where the individual was isolated and over a period of up to a year made to do manual labour and subjected to political indoctrination. The hard physical labour ensured fatigue which supposedly makes the mind willing to accept what it is told as truths. These ‘truths’ were the teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao. Mu Fu-Sheng states that: “The intellectuals resist Communism till they yield to or are crushed by the mounting emotional strain.”³⁷

This treatment of intellectuals was confined to a very small percentage of the population. However, it shows the further problems which faced Chinese democracy because of the influence of Mao Zedong. It also illustrates how thin is the dividing line in China between being democratic-centralist and being totalitarian. There are frightening parallels which can be made between the society in China and George Orwell’s totalitarian society in his book *1984*. One of the catch-phrases in *1984* was “Ignorance is Strength.”³⁸ This is exactly the mentality that operated during the

Great Leap Forward as already illustrated. The thought-reform camps were effectively the practical implementation of the concept that to be solitary in opinion means that you are mad, that is to say you have something wrong with you. Thus dissenting opinions are impossible, and if held are punishable.

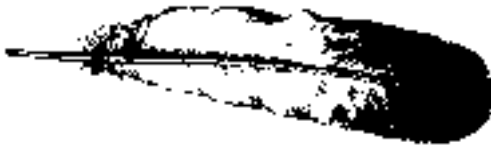
Yet this manipulation of thought was not restricted to intellectuals. Mass campaigns were used in this period to indoctrinate the masses. Of note among these were the Anti-Rightist movement, already mentioned, and the Socialist Education Campaign (1962-1965). Among the objectives of the Socialist Education Campaign was the plan to rid urban youth of elitist ideas by sending them to work in the countryside, by reducing the school year to six months. No attempt shall be made to judge the moral worth of this plan, yet it clearly shows the manipulation of the way the masses thought, in the hopes of conforming them to “leftist values.” What’s more it shows how Mao Zedong had maintained his influence in “the realm of ideology,”³⁹ even though he may have lost control over economic decisions at the time.

Conclusion

Did China have democracy? Certainly it did not have a Western model, which begs the question: what of Chinese democracy? China attempted to attain economic equality for all, resulting in the executive amassing power beyond that which the system stipulated. However, Lenin said that one party should become the vanguard party and be able to act on behalf of the proletariat. Thus it should not have mattered how much power the CCP had as long as they were acting in the interests of the people. Was this the case? Although one can look at the suffering of intellectuals, the peasant masses experienced a raised standard of living through such policies as land reform. Does this fact constitute a “greater good” and thus constitute democracy? Possibly, as after all, China is a communist country based on a proletariat and peasant dictatorship. Yet, the conclusion of this essay is that even though peasants

were helped in the early years after the Revolution in 1949, the fact that the executive had such extensive power led to policies which had such great negative effects that the 'good' of the previous policies was cancelled out. The most damaging of these policies was the Great Leap Forward, which led to the famine deaths of at least 20 million people. Had the centralist system worked as intended then the Big Lie may have been avoided. While this is not to say that democracy was completely disregarded in China in this period, the application of this term can only be made with the recognition that this must be with only very minimal expectations of what democracy is. As suggested, the criterion could be that Chinese 'democracy' serves to facilitate the running of the system. This is to say that—people vote. As James Wang said: "The Party was highly institutionalised from the 1950s to the 1960s."⁴⁰ However, democracy as a concept and as a system has not been something that China has devoted itself to upholding. A reason for this could be the lack of a theoretical base for Chinese democracy, in part due to the remaining influence of Confucianism.

Recent events in China seem to support this essay's thesis. In 1989 the world witnessed massive protests for democracy in Tiananmen Square. Yet the majority of the arguments for democracy were based on the desire for economic prosperity as opposed to the fulfilment of any ideals.⁴¹ The road towards democracy will be a long one for China.



- ¹ A. Heywood, Political Ideologies, An Introduction (London: MacMillan, 1992) p. 269
- ² Ibid., p. 269
- ³ Ibid., p. 281
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 285
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 285
- ⁶ Ibid., pp. 285-286
- ⁷ J. Wang, Contemporary Chinese Politics: An Introduction [3rd Edition] (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989) p. 130
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 130
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 130
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79
- ¹¹ S. Liu, Report on the Draft Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1954)
- ¹² S. Ogden, China's Unresolved Issues [Second Edition] (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992) p. 40
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 40
- ¹⁴ Wang, p. 12
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 12
- ¹⁶ I. Hsu, The Rise of Modern China [Fifth Edition] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 652
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 653
- ¹⁸ Ogden, p. 250
- ¹⁹ W. Rodzinski, The Walled Kingdom [Second Edition] (London: Fontana Press, 1991) p. 108
- ²⁰ Ogden, p. 41
- ²¹ Hsu, p. 655
- ²² Ogden, p. 43
- ²³ Ibid., p. 42
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 43
- ²⁵ J. Spence, The Search For Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990) p. 583
- ²⁶ Liu, p. 36
- ²⁷ G. Chow, The Chinese Economy (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) p. 73. Cited in Ogden, p. 45
- ²⁸ Liu, p. 37
- ²⁹ V. Sit, a speech as cited in an edited format in the South China Morning Post, "Upgrading the Congress," Friday, May 26, 1995, p. 21
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 21
- ³¹ M. Gao, Maoist Discourse and a Critique of the Present Assessments of the Cultural Revolution Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, vol. 26, no. 3, 1994, Boulder, (no pub.) p. 15

³² Ibid., p. 16

³³ Ibid., p. 16

³⁴ Ibid., p. 22

³⁵ Ibid., p. 27

³⁶ Hsu, p. 659

³⁷ F. Mu, The Wilting of the Hundred Flowers (New York: Praeger, 1963) p. 132

³⁸ G. Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (London: Penguin Books, 1954) p. 192

³⁹ Ogden, p. 47

⁴⁰ Wang, p. 101

⁴¹ Ogden, p. 68

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Letter from Scott R. Reisinger, Head of History, Greens Farms Academy
Greens Farms, Connecticut 06436-0127

July 21, 1997

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