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# The Prospect of Democracy: China's Possibility of Political Reform

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THE PROSPECT OF DEMOCRACY: CHINA'S POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL  
REFORM

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of International Relations with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

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## ABSTRACT

What factors help or hinder democratization in China? Democracy in China is not an unknown term, but the difficulty of making “democratic” reforms in China has raised the question of if China will democratize. This literature review and analysis will examine the factors, which help or hinder democratization in China through economic and cultural means. By using a literature review as well as reviewing the concepts of democracy and prerequisites thereof, three scenarios for democratization will be determined. Through the use of the information provided in the latter, I predict that while democracy is possible in China, the state will not reform in the next 5 years by any means. This is due to various factors including increased economic development and the use of “Asian Values.”

Keywords: China, Political Regimes, Democracy, Asia, Chinese Democracy, Democratic Transition

Dedicated to

My parents and brother, thanks for the encouragement

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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VITA

April 21, 1993 .....Born  
Spring 2011 .....High School Graduation, Taylorsville, Kentucky

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Political Science, International Affairs, Asian Religions and Cultures

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

What are the factors that help or hinder democratization in China? Cultural and economic factors are influencing the future course of Chinese politics every year, and with a large economy and ever expanding cultural landscape, China cannot remain the same forever. This literature review will provide reasons for why China can democratize in the near future and what factors can help it. However, the most important need for understanding democratization in China is what type of factors is most important to democratization. I believe that cultural and economic arguments are the best measurements for democratization because of the cultural influence from an ever changing and growing populous and the economy has shaped governments of all kinds around the world. However, among the two of these, economics is the stronger argument of the two because the economy is more easily measured and can influence the impact of cultural changes due to increasing globalization through the world market. The economy holds a stronger argument here and so will be our main focus. However, cultural arguments will still be analyzed and should always be considered when analyzing democratization.

The analysis that follows is split into 7 chapters, beginning an analysis of democracy and what it is defined as for the purposes of this literature review, as well as the prerequisites for democracy through the economy. Since the emphasis of the

argument in this review is the economic argument, the prerequisites of democracy are concentrated in that fact. Afterwards a literature of the main economic arguments such as the development of the Chinese economy, how GDP influences democracy, the Asian Values argument help analyze some of the economic arguments for or against democratization. These factors help focus the arguments for or against democracy through economic means. After economics, a short analysis of a couple cultural arguments for and against democratization will be reviewed. While economics are the concentration of the analysis, cultural arguments should always be considered since economics alone may not influence democratization. After the literature reviews, three scenarios will be suggested based on these arguments for or against democratization in China, after which we will reach our conclusion. Democratization is possible in China, but not for the next five years due to the strong influence of the central government, “Asian Values”, and the success of the economy.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEFINING DEMOCRACY

Democracies are regimes in which elections are free and fair and there is a transition of leadership after elections. The most important note of this definition is that the offices in question must be attained through elections (Cheibub 2010). Elections can be done through three conditions: the outcome of the elections is not known; the winner of the contest actually takes office; future elections follow the first two at regular intervals (Cheibub 2010). To ensure the elections are in fact “democratic” as in competitive and fair and not just merely elections for show, the democratic regime must follow a couple more rules. The most important of these additional rules is the offices in contest must be voted by popular election, there must be more than one party, and an alteration in power according to electoral rules must have taken place (Cheibub 2010).

Robert Dahl defines “ideal democracy” as minimalist. This means that features of a liberal democracy are determinants of the state or systems best “morals.” (Dahl 2014) “An ideal system in this sense is a goal towards which a person or society ought to strive (even if it is not perfectly attainable in practice) and a standard against which the moral worth of what has been achieved, or of what exists, can be measured.” (Dahl 2014) A minimalist democracy is a minimalist rational and representative structure, democracy exists with in the forms of the ones who make the vote share equal representation and rationality (freedom of decision) to elect officials and expect then transitions of power

(Przeworski 1999). Based on Dahl's definition of an "ideal democracy" and the definition in the former, a minimalist view of democracy is our best determinant for a baseline of defining democratization.

## CHAPTER 3

### PREREQUISITES FOR DEMOCRACY

The prerequisites for democracy can be few and far between. By analyzing what is most likely to produce a democracy, we can then find the prerequisites for democracy. Seymour Lipset, political scientist, tackles some of the prerequisites for democracy and claims that for a stable democracy, two complex characteristics must be in place: economic development and legitimacy (Lipset 1959). For the purpose of prerequisites, this study will concentrate on the economic prerequisites. These prerequisites of democracy are not determinants of democracy but rather what qualities democracies tend to have or transition from.

Lipset claims that economic development is constituted into four factors: wealth, education, urbanization, and industrialization. For democracies, all of these factors are very high on Lipset's scale. This leads us to believe that countries with better economies tend to be more democratic (Lipset 1959). Higher education as well as higher levels of wealth leads to a larger middle class, which should lead to higher political involvement. These factors are keys to democratic development and so should be in place for democracy to survive (Lipset 1959).

When remembering our minimalist definition of democracy, it is important to note that Lipset also took precaution to approaching this subject. While the factors mentioned in this chapter do help with the transition and stabilization of democracy, it is

up to the political actors in the state to determine the outcome of a transitional government. The findings here must not be overly stressed, as unique events within a state will determine the persistence for or against democracy (Lipset 1959). Lipset mentions Max Weber's theory that the differences in countries national patterns according to historical events may help or hinder democratic reform. Weber argues that once the democratic process starts, the next event in that particular countries history will be critical for the survival of democratization (Lipset 1959). Lipset explains that in order for democracy to survive, social institutions must be set in place for democratization to go on. This is assuming that the institution that is holding democratic reforms wishes for democracy to take form. This can be done in the form of setting up elections and the process of a democratic regime such as the one mentioned in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERATURE FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE ECONOMY

While many scholars have tried their hand at determining the level of democracy in China as well as theorizing the possibility of democracy, some scholars have determined reasons why China has not become a democracy yet. Mary Gallagher analyzes why China has not become a democracy because of their incredible economic boom over the past three decades. Her main argument is discussing China's success with Foreign Direct Investment (hereafter referred to as FDI) and why it has helped delay political reform in China. This is important to discuss because other countries in East Asia have found success in economic reforms such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (not formally a country), all of which are democracies. China has been able to avoid political reform, and Gallagher attempts to explain why.

The main argument is that FDIs have delayed political reform because they have created an environment in which it encourages political behavior conducive to rejecting reform for the time being. This is because the Chinese have developed FDIs in the wrong order for political reform (Gallagher 2002). China set up SOEs and separated experiments for economic reform long before FDIs were popular in China. In theory, FDIs should have come before these if they were to encourage political reform; instead, they came after, and encouraged principles under the current regime. These FDIs have encouraged competitiveness among different institutions in China's economic latter. The

two main competitions are between domestic firms for FDI investment and between firms for market share and skilled labor. By creating this competition, domestic companies needed regulation and balance in order to keep up with foreign companies and foreign-invested enterprises, and so relied upon the government to issue labor laws and other regulations in order to regulate the competition in China (Gallagher 2002). They also joined organizations such as the World Trade Organization to further help with the regulation of investment and growth of the market economy in China. This dependency created a need for domestic companies to rely on the Chinese government to help with their economic growth, and as long as the liberalization of FDIs continues, the less talk there is of political liberalization.

Gallagher argues that because China was able to liberalize FDIs while balancing domestic companies and the economy, there was no need for political liberalization. This hinders democratic reform in China due to balancing economic reform and transition in regime development. This brings to light an interesting scenario: what if China's economy never sees significant downturn?

Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi support Gallagher's point as they have developed a model for measuring democratic transition in terms of economic development. They discuss that how a state develops their economy is not a factor of the economy developing into a more democratic state. Instead, a more developed economy at a certain income per capita (\$6,000) leads some authoritarian and dictatorship regimes to become stabilized (Przeworski 1997). China's economy has steadily grown over the past five years from \$5,574 (GDP) in 2011 to \$7,593 (GDP) in 2014 (The World Bank 2014). Given Przeworski and others findings of high levels of income correlating with



democracy, China should soon transition towards a democracy within the next five years. However, no signs of decline in the central government have taken place. In fact, one could assume that the central government has maintained tighter control given the recent events of the failed Falon Gong movement and Hong Kong protests as well as significant maneuvers into the South China Sea.

So does the how the Chinese economy develops matter in transitioning for reform? According to Przeworski, no, how a country develops its economy is not a matter for if or when a country transitions from authoritarian rule. This is determined by political actors within the country at any given level of development (Przeworski 1997). Gallagher's theory is rooted in the basis that economic reforms before outside influence could touch the economy was the main factor in preventing reform during development. These theories and hypotheses merely help us determine the likelihood of certain events such as a transition towards democracy in authoritarian regimes. Yet how the economic factors of Chinese development over the past few decades both help and hinder democracy. According to Przeworski and Gallagher, the development of the Chinese economy plays a major role in what may or may not be political reform in the future. As China's economy continually grows, one should remain observant of the changes in the growth of the Chinese middle class, as they have the most to gain from economic development.

The "Asian Values" argument was implemented first by Lee Kwan Yew, the former leader of Singapore (Elgin 2010). "修身齐家治国平天下 (Xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia)" is how Lee Kuan Yew defines the "Asian Model" (Zakaria 2009). He defines this quote as the culmination of a few principles that Asian nations follow to hold

order within their country. Lee Kuan Yew defines these principles as follows: Xiushen is looking after yourself, cultivating yourself; Qijia is to look after the family; Zhiguo is to look after your country; pingtianxia means that all is peaceful under heaven though it translates better as pacify your country (Zakaria 2009).

This definition of the “Asian Model” is the basis for “Asian Values” and how Lee Kuan Yew defines East Asia as different from countries like the United States. “Asian Values” as a doctrine argues that democracy is a hindrance to development, and so an authoritarian regime is needed to promote a faster developing economy (Thompson 2001). This argument is used by mainly authoritarian regimes (Singapore, China, etc.) to the criticisms of not making more democratic reforms. It is a justification of authoritarian rule until economic development fits the “mold” of developing more democratic reforms (Thompson 2001). However, who is to determine when development has reached a point for justified democratic reform? This problem is why “Asian Values” is a hindrance of democratic reform in China as well as the rest of the Asia Pacific region.

Kim Dae Jung argues that “Asian Values” is not a valid contender against western-style reforms. Jung takes several of Lee Kuan Yew’s statements and expounds upon how they do not apply the changing landscape of East Asia. Lee claims that family oriented practices are the reason for success in modernization and economic development in East Asia (Jung 1994). This is why democratic reforms do not work in East Asian countries because of the difference in cultural models. However, as mentioned before, “Asian Values” is merely a validation of authoritarian rule till democracy is ready to take place at the right moment of development (Thompson 2001). Lee’s claims make no effort to self-evaluate the changing political and cultural standard in East Asia such as the rise

in individualism as opposed to collectivism (Jung 1994). Also, Lee claims that governments shy away from personal matters where the family can take control. However, the opposite is true and East Asian governments, democratic or not, intrude in the affairs of the people regularly, especially the government of Singapore (Jung 1994). “Asian Values” has many flaws towards its argument, but it is one cultural excuse that can prevent and so hinder democratic reform.

While in Singapore, strict governmental rule maintains stability whilst using cultural values as a justification (Elgin 2010); China has used “Asian Values” as a catalyst for unification. China is currently one of the worlds leading economies, and the largest in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). China’s Liu Xiaobo, a political reform activist, argued that China’s government argues against reforms on subjects such as human rights on the basis of “national differences” and “traditions.” (Thompson 2001) This correlates with the “Asian Values” argument of placing a high emphasis on cultural identity as opposed to political reform. However, the problem with China is that in its early modern history the PRC tried to destroy past cultural identifiers through the Cultural Revolution. During this time, China underwent one of the most devastating losses of cultural artifacts in history. Following this, government officials argued for a more “developmentalist” argument that democracy must be delayed in favor of economic development (Thompson 2001).

Presently, China has been calling back to their cultural roots as a move towards uniformity. In April 2014, the PRC Ministry of Education issued guidelines for schools, primary education through college, to teach traditional culture in the classroom (Ying 2015). Xi Jinping stated, “China's cultural genes should be planted in the minds of the

young.” (Ying 2015) While not calling on “Asian Values” in particular, as China develops it becomes increasingly clear that the state wishes to maintain their loose homogeneity through cultural values. Just as Singapore invoked their own cultural identity as a means to justify harsh authoritarian rule, China claims cultural identity to set themselves apart from “western” style reforms.

## CHAPTER 5

### LITERATURE FOR DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH CULTURE

Andrew Nathan is a leading scholar in the study of what could be future democratic movements in China. His article coauthored with Tianjin Shi *Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey* analyzes how democracy can work in China from the cultural perspective of Chinese citizens. The study analyzes how we should approach the study and why it is important or pertinent to the future of what could be in China.

Nathan and Shi pull from James Gibson and Raymond Duch for their study. Gibson and Duch identified 5 conducive values of democracy. Nathan and Shi determined that out of the 5, 3 of them would be appropriate for a study of democracy in China. They are as follows: 1) how citizens perceive the government is salient to their lives as having an impact on them and their families; 2) do people believe that they have the capability to understand and engage in politics? ; 3) to what extent are citizens prepared to be tolerant of those who hold different political beliefs? (Nathan 1993) Through these, Nathan and Shi determined two things, the prospect of democracy in China and Chinese cultural distinctiveness.

Nathan and Shi analyzed political impact and how the people perceive the government impacts their daily lives. Most citizens' education level, which had an

equivalent of primary school or less, felt that the government had no impact on them whatsoever (Nathan 1993). This is troubling from the perspective of possible democracy in China because based on Nathan's first principle, the government being salient to the people's lives, is non-existent.

The second set of surveys measured political efficacy, or what is defined as "the feeling that individual political actions does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process." (Campbell 1954) Nathan examines two sub sections of political efficacy, which are internal, an individual's competence of understanding and participating in politics, and external efficacy, the beliefs about the responsiveness of the government (Nathan 1993). Beginning with internal efficacy, the Chinese believe they understand local affairs more than they do national affairs. They also believe they could be leaders in local governments more so than they could in national government (Nathan 1993). Less educated people are more likely not to understand the national government whereas the more educated people, typically some college and above do understand the national government and it's impact (Nathan 1993). Since the sample reported is mostly uneducated on the intricacies of the national government, then few are likely to want reform on a national level. However, as the country develops, so will education levels (The World Bank 2000).

Turning to external efficacy, the sample was surveyed on how Chinese citizens expected the government to give them equal treatment. The least educated, the majority, expected equal treatment. However, the most educated at a university level were the majority of those who wrote they thought they expected less expectations of equal treatment (Nathan 1993). This can be attributed, as Nathan suggests, that as you grow

more educated and more successful, if one finds a block in trying to achieve a goal, the only logical choice is to turn to unconventional political activities. This is either opposing the political system or taking advantage of their loopholes, or even expressing frustration at the matter (Nathan 1993). As the population grows more educated, it may be more likely that they will develop a cultural attitude conducive to democracy.

The last study was that of political tolerance, or the equality of citizens and protection of minority rights (Nathan 1993). The study found that China was more intolerant than all other countries surveyed with it. It was linked to education levels, with Chinese illiterates being the least tolerant. Also at higher levels of education, when compared with other countries such as Australia, Germany, and Italy, China was still the least tolerant (Nathan 1993). This is in line with others such as Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture*. Nathan and Shi repeatedly refer to Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* throughout the study. Political tolerance of other parties varies greatly based on an ideology index, the greater the separation in ideology, and the greater the conflict (Putnam 1971).

Nathan and Shi's findings have suggested that for the possibility of democracy in China, if the regime starts to transition, they will find many troubles. Some include the difficulty in political engagement, for fear of government retaliation or otherwise. Also fear that most citizens will be politically intolerant of their peers, be it their education levels or ethnicity. Nathan believes that with the right balance of educated and uneducated, stability can be brought to the country through transition thus helping the case for democracy.

In Bruce Dickson's *Who Wants to be a Communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China*, we have a unique take on modern thoughts of democracy in China from the perspective of how people view aspects of democracy (voting) and being apart of the Chinese Communist Party (further referred to as the CCP). In 1978, after Deng Xiaoping helped pass electoral law, the people could vote directly for local officials. Dickson analyzed democracy and voting behavior through CCP membership in how likely they were to vote based on factors such as age, income, party participation, and the people's satisfaction with the level of democracy (personal freedom, economic prosperity).

How does members of the CCP voting relate back to democracy in China? The findings in the study saw that the more satisfied with democracy was practiced in China (voting and voting practices) the more likely they were to vote (Dickson 2014). Age also had a factor in this, as the younger the voter, the more likely they were to vote. The people vote for what they believe will either help them-selves or keep the status quo (Dickson 2014). Harry Harding argues this point as well, saying that the central government is doing this to revitalize institutions (Zheng 1994). Voting, while in non-democratic elections, does give experience with elections, which could be useful for democratic reforms.

The final part of Dickson's study was finding who was more likely to support central institutions and local institutions of government. This was based on a number of factors including satisfaction of level of democracy (personal freedom, economic prosperity), age, CCP membership, GDP, per capita GDP, education, and gender (Dickson 2014). It revealed that those with CCP membership were more likely to support



the political regime and keep the status quo. However, the results between the central and local governments differed significantly. People were more likely to support the central political institutions and criticize the local institutions based on dissatisfaction with their local officials (Dickson 2014). The fact the study found that CCP members are less likely to support local institutions is unexpected since the party wants their members to support all levels of government. However, this may create an incentive to want to change the current system from within. As seen in Andrew Nathan's study, Chinese citizens feel they could participate in leadership roles at the local level (Nathan 1993). This concentration on the central party's status quo is a hindrance to democracy. Promoting the reigning institution hurts the chances of reform and promotes the PRC as an unchanging presence.

It seems that the more people are dissatisfied with the economic conditions and local affairs, the more likely they are to protest and want more personal and economic freedoms. The CCP has been dealing with this problem by making the reforms necessary to adapt to rapid development in areas such as the media, politics, and the economy (Zheng 1994). By being more open to the central government and promoting young voters into the CCP, the PRC is curbing more democratic reforms and adapting to current modern development in an authoritarian regime. However, as reform comes so do the consequences of change, and as the young become more individualistic (Zheng 1994) the more the government will have to reform from collectivism or collective interest.

## CHAPTER 6

### SCENARIOS FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

The first scenario would be to allow for democracy to take its course in China. Many of the readings on the arguments of “Asian Values” and economic development such as Przeworski (Chapter 4) suggest that democracy will make its appearance when a certain level of economic development takes place. It is not uncommon to see authoritarian regimes collapse and transition at a certain economic level (Przeworski 1997). However, the guarantee of democracy as outlined in Chapter 4 is not certain on economic development alone. This is where the argument of “Asian Values” comes into play. In Chapter 4, we examined what “Asian Values” means and how it is used. According to the rhetoric, “Asian Values” is the argument to maintain an authoritarian rule until development allows for democratic reforms (Thompson 2001). Taking into account the economic and “Asian Values” argument, all we must do is wait for democracy to take its form in China.

Assuming the Chinese government adapts to the changing world market, the Chinese may not have to transition to democracy at all. Taking into consideration Gallagher’s argument about FDI’s non-existent influence on the Chinese economy, and China’s economy being the largest in the world (largest in PPP) then China may not have a reason to transition. If outside influences have no effect on the developing economy,

then democracy may not be needed or influenced in China due to economic pressures. Also, since the economy is so developed and growing, the population can be complacent with transition due to the satisfaction with their current economic status. It also allows for the central government to have a strong influence on policy since there is no economic pressure to change.

A third and final scenario could be that as China's economy grows, so does education levels due to increasing wages. As wages increase, the more likely parents can afford educations for their children and as urbanization is also rapidly increasing due to industrialization and a turn from the sleepy agrarian society, children are more likely to have access to education. Lipset's argument that education and wealth correlate with democratic states, as well as with Nathan and Shi's findings that the more educated a citizen is the more likely they are politically active. This could mean a democratic transition in China if more of the population becomes educated and wealthy, creating a large middle class and pressure domestically on the Chinese government to cater to economic and personal rights of Chinese citizens that could mean democratic style reforms. As more Chinese become wealthy, the more influence they have on the economic and political landscape of China. China, given these possible factors could democratize due to the economic growth in wealth of their own people.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

If when we analyze political movements, cultural standards, or economic reforms within China without first understanding the Chinese perspective, then a true understanding will never happen (Harding 1982). Understanding the Chinese perspective on the economy and what factors influence it can help us realize what helps or hinders democratization in China, be it how the economy develops, the “Asian Values” argument, or the influence of the GDP. The economy may be the largest influence on what will help democratization in China, but currently there is no sign that China will democratize in the near future.

While the signs and implications for reform are present in modern China, the government still holds too much control over the people and economy to be put down or reformed. The only way China will liberalize their political system in my opinion is if the economy falters. If the economy falters, then political reform may not be far behind, however, if it is democratic reform we do not know, nor can we easily predict. However, hindrances on democracy are currently too great for transition to take place and may not be possible for the next five years.

These assumptions can only be made in speculation and assumption, with out hard evidence from this decade, it is hard to tell how modern Chinese citizens believe in the terms of democracy could mean for the perception of Chinese elites on capitalism and

democracy in China. This may only be the study of a very presumptuous hypothesis, but democracy is possible in China given the right factors.

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