

Grassroots Political Changes

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The conventional view of post-Mao Zedong China is that it has had extraordinary economic changes, but few political changes. The World Bank has called China's rate of economic growth of 9-10% a year for the last twenty years not only the fastest in the world today, but in world history. Yet, while China has moved to a market economy, it continues to be ruled by an authoritarian Leninist party-state.

Nevertheless, China's political system has also experienced some changes, though not on the scale of what is happening in the Chinese economy. In the late 1980s, villagers began holding multi-candidate elections for village heads and village councils that during the early years of the twenty-first century spread to 90% of China's villages. Multi-candidate elections are also held for local people's councils and neighborhood committees in the cities. A few townships have experimented with multi-candidate elections for township heads. In addition, thousands of NGOs were established, but had to be registered under the auspices of a government organization and registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Moreover, complying with Deng Xiaoping's dictum that the head of the Party cannot serve more than two five-year terms, China introduced term limits for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, the transition from the party leadership of Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in 2002-2003 was the smoothest transition in Chinese Communist history. All of these political reforms, however, were sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party in order to maintain stability and to regain the party's legitimacy after the chaos of Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

Other political changes have occurred in the post-Mao era without the consent of the party. My new book "From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China" focuses on the emergence of various individuals and groups who have sought to assert their political rights in the post-Mao era without party sanction. A "comrade" during the Mao era was one who did whatever the party ordered him to do. Therefore, when intellectuals and others criticized the party during the Hundred Flowers period in 1956 and the first half of 1957, they did so because Mao had ordered them to rid the party of its bureaucratic ways. Similarly, in the Cultural Revolution Mao ordered China's youth to attack the party's leaders whom Mao believed were plotting against him. They were acting as "comrades" in carrying out the orders of the party leader.

Assertion of Political Rights in the Post-Mao Era

When individuals and groups began to criticize the party's policies and called for political reforms soon after Mao's death in 1976, they were acting as citizens because unlike in the Mao era, they were doing so of their own volition and were attempting to assert their right to participate in politics.

With China's move to the market and opening up to the outside world in the 1980s and 1990s, the post-Mao leadership relaxed the party's controls over everyday life. This loosening-up led not only to a dynamic economy and the emergence of ideological diversity—neo-Maoists, neo-Confucians, liberals, conservatives and the new left--, it also led to a growing sense of rights consciousness, particularly of political rights, as various individuals and groups attempted to assert their right to speak out and organize on a variety of issues without the party's permission. Some of those asserting their political rights were influenced by East European and Soviet dissidents in the late 1970s and 1980s who attributed their actions to their own constitutions. Similarly, the Chinese individuals and groups called for political rights based on the stipulation of freedom of speech and association in Article 35 in China's constitution.

The demands for political reforms were initially articulated and acted upon by two groups of intellectuals. One group was the "establishment intellectuals" who returned from exile in the countryside or prison after Mao's death and staffed the party's research institutes, national media, official commissions and professional organizations. They became members of the intellectual networks of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, the party leaders in the 1980s. When their political patrons-- Hu in 1986 and Zhao in the aftermath of the military

crackdown on the Tiananmen demonstrators on the June 4, 1989 -- were purged so were these establishment intellectuals for calling for political reforms. I describe these establishment intellectuals in my previous book "Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China."

"From Comrade to Citizen" focuses on the "disestablished intellectuals." These were people who would have been in the establishment but for the fact that their activities as Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution and as leaders of the 1989 student demonstrations led to their removal from the establishment. When in the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized college students, called Red Guards, to rebel against the party, their teachers and families, they caused chaos. Mao then ordered them to go to the countryside to learn from the peasants. There, far away from family, school and authority, they began to think on their own, question the party and form their own discussion groups. The impact of Mao's policies on the Cultural Revolution generation was contradictory. On the one hand, they were deprived of an education; on the other, they were taught to question authority.

Thus, soon after they returned to the cities after Mao's death in 1976, they launched the Democracy Wall movement of late 1978-79 in which they not only challenged party policies, they even called for political reforms in order to prevent the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. They used the methods they had learned in the Cultural Revolution—forming groups, putting up wall posters, publishing pamphlets and engaging in public debates. Initially Deng allowed them to continue their movement because it helped remove Maoists from power, but once that was done, Deng then repressed the movement and imprisoned their leaders in 1980.

The other group to assert their rights in the post-Mao era was the leaders of the 1989 demonstrations, who among other demands, also called for political reforms. Though they too were imprisoned after the June 4 crackdown, they as well as the leaders of Democracy Wall movement were released from prison in the mid 1990s in order for China to get the Olympics in the year 2008. Their release reveals that Western pressure on human rights issues can have an impact on political events in China. Whereas Mao did not care what the outside world thought of him or China, the post-Mao leadership responds to outside pressure because they want to be recognized and accepted by the outside world and to be seen as playing by the rules of the international community.

Unlike in the Mao era, China's move to the market made it possible for these disestablished intellectuals and released political prisoners to support themselves as small business people or workers. They also led demonstrations, organized petitions, and formed political groups during the 1990s. Also with the privatization of publishing in the post-Mao era, they were able to present views that diverged from the party's by publishing books and articles outside party auspices and having their books distributed by private booksellers.

Equally important, in the post-Mao era, intellectuals, particularly the disestablished intellectuals, for the first time were willing to join with ordinary workers in political actions. Although during the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, the students isolated the workers who wished to participate in the demonstrations because they knew of the party's fear of a Chinese Solidarity movement, afterwards when they were thrown out of the establishment, they were willing to join with workers, farmers and ordinary citizens in political actions. An example of this alliance can be seen in the attempt in 1998 to establish the China Democracy Party, CDP, the first effort in the People's Republic to form an opposition party. The leaders of the CDP came from Cultural Revolution and 1989 generations and were joined by a small number of small entrepreneurs, workers, and farmers.

Their strategy was to establish the CDP as local NGOs by registering with the local offices of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which was the ministry in charge of NGOs. This effort began in Hangzhou, led by veterans of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. It spread to the east coast and then inland to Hunan and Sichuan. A regional CDP was established in China's Northeast by veterans of the Cultural Revolution. Their movement

was coordinated and assisted by the new communications technologies—the Internet and cell phones-- introduced into China in the mid 1990s. Despite the censorship and filters, these technologies made it possible to organize on a regional and national scale before the party crackdown. In addition, in another indication of the impact of outside influence on events in China, the founders of the CDP timed their efforts to a series of visits of important foreign leaders to China in the second half of 1998, beginning with President Clinton in June 1998, followed by British Prime Minister, the UN Commissioner on Human Rights and the French president. At the end of these visits in late 1998 and early 1999, the party arrested the leaders of the CDP.

Despite the repeated suppression of the grass-roots efforts of the disestablished intellectuals to assert their political rights, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, increasing consciousness and articulation of political rights as well as of economic rights was spreading to the population in general-- workers, peasants, a growing middle class, and religious believers. Peasants, thrown off their land to make way for factories and infrastructure projects, demanded more compensation; ordinary citizens called for the right to clean water and clean air; and workers who lost their jobs in state industries demanded health care and pensions. Kevin O'Brien, political scientist at Berkeley, has pointed out that peasants exert their rights by their actions. But, by the early twenty-first century they are asserting their rights with words as well. I myself witnessed a protest of farmers in 2003 on the outskirts of Xi'an at the entrance of the Big Goose Pagoda, where peasants held up posters demanding their right to more compensation for the land that had been taken away from them for modernization projects.

The perennial distinction in Chinese history between the intellectuals and the rest of the population has become blurred since the mid-1990s as intellectuals joined with other classes to bring about political change and as other groups in the population demand political rights. Unlike the Western bourgeoisie, China's rising middle class is not independent of the political leadership. China's most successful business people are being inducting into the party. In fact, their ability to be successful in business depends on their connections with the party. Therefore, the major participants in these efforts for political reforms are not the newly-rich business people, but other members of the rising middle class-- the disestablished intellectuals, journalists, a number of defense lawyers, and small business people.

Grass-roots assertions of political rights do not necessarily guarantee movement toward democracy, but they are prerequisites for the establishment of democratic institutions. There can be citizenship without democracy, but there cannot be democracy without citizen participation. These various and accelerating grass-roots efforts of various groups and individuals to assert political rights signify the beginnings of genuine change in the relationship between China's population and Chinese Communist Party at the start of the twenty-first century.