

China's long march towards political reform

«China is now the largest laboratory of economic, social and political change in human history» according to Chinese political scientist Zhang Weiwei in a recent editorial in the International Herald Tribune. That may sound like hyperbole – but given the pace and radical nature of the economic and social transformation process which the country, with its 1.3 billion-strong population, has undergone since the reform policies were launched 25 years ago, it really is no exaggeration.

China's rapid rise from a developing country on the brink of collapse (during the Cultural Revolution) to one of the world's leading economic powers, its leap forward out of poverty and need towards growing prosperity – albeit shared out on a much less egalitarian basis – plus the powerful appeal which this Asian powerhouse exerts over investors worldwide are merely the outward manifestations of its development dynamics. Far more important are the forces driving this process internally. Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) at least, the progressive liberalization of the economy – with the state increasingly confining its role to macroeconomic management and leaving the rest to the market – and the reform of property ownership mean that China's transformation from a centrally planned economy to a decentralized market-economy is now irreversible. In parallel, a social liberalization process has taken place, with a shift towards an increasingly pluralistic range of lifestyles, value systems and social milieux. As a consequence, the conventional instruments of social control wielded by the Leninist one-party state are of only very limited impact. Particularly striking is the

desire for self-determination among the reform-minded, predominantly urban middle class (now comprising some 200–250 million Chinese), who have a good income, a high level of education and access to modern information and communication technologies.

The escalation of a conflict

With hindsight, Deng Xiaoping's call for «a liberation of thoughts», which marked the launch of his economic reform and liberalization programme in late 1978, developed a two-edged dynamics of its own. On the one hand, it was a much-needed strategy, which, in a constructive and undogmatic way, opened up new scope for action as long as it fitted in with the objectives of economic and technological renewal and social development. On the other hand, it also had a disruptive effect as soon as the desire for emancipation and co-determination among certain social groups challenged the system of political order and the Communist Party's monopoly of power.

As a result, during the first decade of reform, a periodically recurring pattern of conflict emerged in which the challenge posed by opposing forces, and the militant resistance mounted against them, each gained the upper hand in turn. The first «Beijing Spring» in late 1978/early 1979, which propelled the programmatic concept of China's «Fifth Modernization»

There is still no right to strike, but Chinese people are starting to dare to go out into the streets to defend their interests.



Jürgen Kahl
Neue Zürcher Zeitung
Erkrath, Germany
kahl-sung@t-online.de

(democracy) into circulation more swiftly than anticipated, ended with draconian terms of imprisonment for the civil rights activists involved and the adoption of the «Four Cardinal Principles» (upholding the leading role of the Communist Party, the people's democratic dictatorship, the socialist road, and Marxism-Leninism/Mao Zedong thought), which remain in force today, stifling the modernization process.

The second protest and civil rights movement, spearheaded by students and intellectuals in spring 1989, developed such an impetus that it split the party leadership and ultimately culminated in the use of military force. Ever since the dual impact of 4 June 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which made the issue of political reform a taboo subject, the structural conflict between the (more market-liberal) economy and the (authoritarian-dictatorial) political order has steadily intensified. This makes economic and social development vulnerable to crises and exposes it to instability – a factor which should not be underestimated.

Realism, not radicalism: A way out of the impasse?

Fifteen years on, it is still difficult to predict, with any degree of certainty, the direction this basic modernization conflict is likely to take. The rather hazy terminology used by Western observers gives evidence to this (see Sebastian Heilmann: *Das politische System der Volksrepublik China*, Wiesbaden 2002). The «democracy by stealth» hypothesis is the somewhat apologetic attempt to keep alive the convergence theory born out of the Cold War. The concept of «authoritarian pluralism» is so riddled with contradictions that it reveals its progenitors' lack of inspiration rather than anything else. Nonetheless, there are indications that a reciprocal learning process is under way, whose rationalist approaches suggest that, in the longer term, there may be an – albeit still very slim – chance to surmount China's self-imposed blockade. The dramatic collapse of the protest movement in 1989 has also impacted somewhat on the self-perception and strategies of intellectual champions of democracy. As time has passed, there has been a sober recognition that the idealistic focus on a fully developed Western-style model of democracy is out of step with China's current state of development and is not supported by the vast majority of its population (the workers were only marginally involved in the protests of 1989, and the peasants played no role whatsoever). In the mainstream intellectual debate in the

A law on rural self-government was adopted in the People's Republic of China as early as 1987.

1990s, this was reflected – not least as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union – in how the student movement shifted away from radicalism towards a pragmatic preference for «democratization in small steps», in line with the gradualistic model of economic liberalization.

This matches the empirical observation that the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population have a long way to go before they link their routine complaints about their country's arbitrary authorities, violations of rights and corruption to practical concepts of a system of democratic self-determination and the separation of powers. Instead, calls for political control, legal certainty and the transparency of government action are voiced occasionally and indirectly, usually when the real-life experiences of individual citizens or social groups clash with their heightened awareness of the law or a well-informed and more precisely articulated understanding of good governance (i.e. transparency and an absence of corruption).

After a comprehensive ban on thinking which lasted for almost a decade, the new Chinese leadership under President Hu Jintao, which came into office in late 2002, has injected new life into the political reform debate with some fresh ideas of its own. Under pressure from the growing problems facing China, it is a tentative attempt – via a top-down process – to bring political standards and government practice closer into line with the changed economic and social conditions and improve their functionality. The amount of pragmatic flexibility introduced in practice is evident not only from the subtle changes in terminology relating to governance («a socialist state under the rule of law», «a socialist democracy»): It is especially apparent from the efforts being made to strengthen the notion of constitutionalism, as witnessed by the adoption of constitutional amendments by the National People's Congress in spring. The most important of these codified reforms of the system is the right now enshrined in Article 13: «Citizens' lawful private property is inviolable». By contrast, the new paragraph included in Article 33 merely states that «the State respects and protects human rights», which thus has more

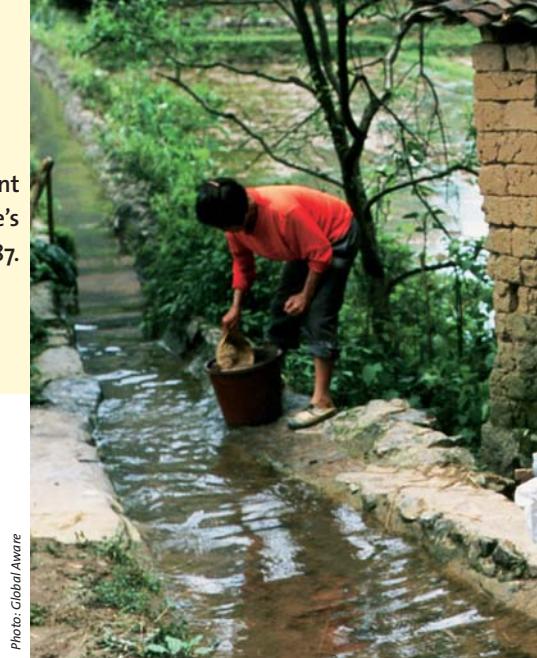


Photo: Global Aware

of a declaratory and symbolic character. To what extent the latest commitments to «democratic management» and the introduction of «collective debates» in political decision-making will be translated into substantively enhanced rights of participation remains to be seen. Nonetheless, there does appear to be a recognition that the essentially reform-resistant Leninist system of leadership is increasingly forfeiting its ability to govern a complex society that relies on a division of labour and faces heightened social tensions, yet lacks institutional mechanisms for participation, control and rational conflict management.

A rural experiment in grassroots democracy

One of the more unusual aspects of China's development is that the most comprehensive experiment with participation at grassroots level to date has taken place not in the cities but in the countryside, in China's villages. It resulted from a courageous attempt to resolve an acute crisis with innovative political instruments. On the other hand, its progress is a classic example of how the unrestricted rights of the party and its functionaries to intervene and control threaten to undermine strategies aimed at achieving broader legitimacy for a system of self-government which is accepted by the people.

When Deng Xiaoping's reformist government released the peasants from their forced collectivization in the late 1970s and restored the rights of specialized farming households to operate within the contract system, China's agriculture underwent a rapid expansion on a scale hitherto unprecedented in the history of



the People's Republic. However, this economic liberation had a number of less desirable side-effects. With the dissolution of the people's communes, the organizational structures existing in the countryside – which until then had maintained rigorous political and administrative control – collapsed.

To fill the vacuum left by the unravelling of the administration and the progressive loss of authority by the local party organizations, traditional elites – clans, secret societies and obscure cults – emerged from the darkroom of history, especially in the poorer rural hinterlands, and claimed leadership rights over villages and hamlets. The crisis deepened when, from the mid-1980s onwards, the prosperity curve in agriculture defied all expectations and took a sudden downturn, further widening the rural-urban income gap.

With the provisional law on rural self-government adopted in 1987, the government was pursuing two political objectives. Firstly, it sought to impose more effective public control on local functionaries, whose reputations were severely dented by their frequent abuse of power, corruption and arbitrary tyranny, and to replace them with trustworthy figures from the local community. The law stated that the villagers' committees, as self-governing bodies, must be elected from candidates nominated by the local community in a secret ballot and must also be subject to the control of directly elected village assemblies.

After an eleven-year trial period, the final version of the law on the organization of villagers' committees was passed in 1998, when it entered into force on a nationwide basis (Heike Holbig: *Lokalverwaltung in der VR China. Zum Wandel parteistaatlicher Kontrollstrukturen seit 1979*. In: *China aktuell*, February 2001, p. 153-168). Since

then, according to official Chinese statistics, village committees have been set up in line with this procedure in almost all of China's more than one million-plus villages. However, independent studies have revealed that this new system has produced a democratically controlled system of local government worthy of the name in just one-third of cases.

It would seem that despite the adoption of this formal procedure, in the vast majority of cases little or nothing has changed in the power relations on the ground, with the local party functionaries continuing to dictate terms. The constraints on democracy contained in some provisions of the law create considerable scope for manipulation and interference. They establish – as a matter of principle – the party's role as the «leadership core» in rural self-government and state that the village committees are subject to the «guidance» of the municipal governments above them. On the other hand, it has also become apparent that the local self-government bodies are most effective when they can count on support from the economic sector, i.e. from powerful local entrepreneurs.

Economic power as lever

The obstacles to the «soft» development championed by political scientist Zhang Weiwei should not be ignored (see box). In the constitutional debate in 2003, some intellectuals ventured to propose far-reaching democratization measures. The official party newspaper responded in a leader published on 18 December 2003, which marked out the limits to the scope for discussion and made substantive political reforms as much of an impossibility as squaring the circle: «Denying the leading role of the party is to deny the party's pre-eminence. In that case, there can no longer be any discussion of a socialist democracy and a socialist legal system. Maintaining the party's leading role is one of the key distinctions between socialist and capitalist democracy, and between a socialist and a capitalist system of law.» In light of China's growing social polarization and its urban-rural divide (income, healthcare, social security, education), the distinction between a socialist and a capitalist democracy highlights yet another acute problem. With the Communist Party actively courting the new middle-class achievers (qualified experts, managers, private enterprise), i.e. the winners in the reform process, in a bid to secure their allegiance, the traditional bedrock of the socialist system (the alliance of workers and peasants) is failing to get a hearing and is losing influence. This lack of a voice

is felt in various ways. In the Communist Party's leadership bodies, starting with the Central Committee, and in the National People's Congress (NPC) – the Chinese Parliament – the number of delegates drawn from the workers' or peasant milieu is on the decline. In the NPC's 1975–1978 legislative term, 51 percent of delegates came from these social backgrounds – compared with just 19 percent in the 1998–2003 legislative term.

As a result of this structural weakness, both social groups, with their social concerns, are also under-represented in the informal consultations which take place in advance of all major and especially economically relevant decisions. In the debate about the constitutional amendment to protect private property, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC) established its position as a powerful and influential organization lobbying on behalf of Chinese private enterprise. This contrasted sharply with the situation of the peasants, who lack a comparable body to represent their interests. As a consequence, their concerns about their livelihoods and about the agricultural aspect of the WTO negotiations went largely unheeded in the public debate.

China's «soft» transformation

Under the heading «China Will Change in Its Own Way», the Chinese political scientist Zhang Weiwei, in a recent leader in the International Herald Tribune (20 May 2004), outlined an optimistic scenario. He described how the People's Republic will cope with the much-needed transformation of its political system, beginning with «rudimentary democracy» and progressing in a «gradual, pragmatic and accumulative» process. «After more than a century of devastating wars and chaotic revolutions, and after two decades of moderate and successful economic reforms, the Chinese seem more willing to embrace such gradual and even partial political reforms than revolution.» In the author's view, developments that favour China's gradual democratization include an emerging civil society, increased levels of education, and an expanding middle class. However, fully fledged democratization may still be «a long way off», requiring persistence and a measured approach for two reasons in particular: «the fear among the population that adversarial politics may cause an economic downturn and political chaos; and the absence of credible models for a large country like China to move out of authoritarianism». The «paralysing experiences» of the former Soviet Union and Indonesia are discouraging, according to Weiwei.