

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Whither China?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3dn505n2>

Journal

ASIAN PERSPECTIVE, 48(3)

ISSN

0258-9184

Author

O'Brien, Kevin J

Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed

Whither China?

Kevin J. O'Brien
Travers Department of Political Science
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720
kobrien@berkeley.edu

August 6, 2023

Whither China?

Inviting a specialist on one country to review a masterful work of comparative history is never entirely fair. The request is likely to elicit a torrent of carping about small errors of fact. But nitpicking about what has taken place in China is not an option here. Slater and Wong, in their study of developmental Asian countries that have democratized or not, get the China story right. Sinologists will find little to dispute (nor, admittedly, much new) in their rehearsal of the major political and economic events of the last 40-odd years. The highpoints are all hit and, as is difficult to do in a macro-history of twelve countries, lifting the level of abstraction does no harm, and instead leads to an economical dash through a mountain of empirical material that often fails to cohere in the partial, context-specific accounts that area specialists are inclined to favor.

The primary added value of *From Development to Democracy* lies on the theory side, in particular the authors' focus on placing each country's experience with economic growth and political opening in comparative perspective and devising a conceptual framework that divides much of Asia into four clusters (developmental statism, developmental militarism, developmental Britannia, developmental socialism). Slater and Wong also explore variation within each cluster and home in on a limited number of factors, most notably the strength of a regime, which say a great deal about whether political leaders choose to pursue democratization. Theirs is a new-and-improved "ode" (viii) to modernization theory that assigns considerable weight to structural changes, but also allows space for agency to scramble the picture and override what "ought" to happen, at least for a time.

For a China scholar, the result is a thought-provoking analysis that weds attention to the 1989 protest movement and its suppression, and the decades since, with an informed imagining of what might transpire in the future. But juggling structure and agency, however skillfully done,

and walking the line between a tidy theory that can anticipate outcomes and a messy reality that allows for contingencies and for Party leaders to make their own decisions, means that the reader is sometimes left thinking that China's democratization and "refusal to democratize" may both be totally possible, and it is not obvious which of the two would disconfirm Slater and Wong's theory. Factors promoting China's democratization are laid out next to obstacles blocking it, and it is challenging to determine what will matter most, especially in the long term. Perhaps the coefficients on the variables can only become apparent in retrospect, and choice is a necessary fudge factor that allows for different outcomes. That said, identifying what we should be attentive to during China's next stage of political evolution (based on what has been important elsewhere in developmental Asia) is no small feat and provides a clear set of questions for scholars seeking to understand China's future.

Slater and Wong's assessment of China's democratic potential rests on a comparison of the politico-economic system in 1989 with that of today. Party leaders "refused to concede" democracy following nationwide protests 35 years ago because the regime was too weak (rather than too strong), and could plausibly pursue democratization now, because they should have "stability confidence" (democracy would not greatly disrupt political order) and "victory confidence" (a reasonable expectation that they would win elections held under a level playing field). During the 1980s the regime was "gathering strengths." The Party was getting its house in order and focusing on stability, and it had put performance legitimacy at the center of its development strategy, while opening the country's doors to foreign trade and investment. But China had yet to fully recover from the damage the Cultural Revolution did to the Party, the bureaucracy, popular support, and economic growth. At a time when market actors had been empowered and the provinces were riding high, the regime was both too strong to collapse and

too weak to take a chance on pre-emptive democratization. Fast-forward to the present: the Party and bureaucracy have been rebuilt, the coercive apparatus is formidable, popular support is enviable, consultative mechanisms provide a degree of feedback, wealth has been created at a remarkable pace, and the Party is the only available vehicle to achieve national greatness. For Slater and Wong, the regime is now strong enough to concede democracy without undue risk.

This argument raises a question about regime strength: when is strong strong enough? The chapters on other countries offer helpful guidance, and differences in strength (and stability and victory confidence) within the four clusters are systematically examined. But a certain fuzziness is hard to avoid. (This is also evident in the discussion of “ominous” and “reassuring” signals.) Gauging regime strength is crucial because Slater and Wong’s analysis of the rest of developmental Asia suggests that a brief “bittersweet spot” exists when a regime has passed its apex of power, and everything aligns to make democratization most likely. If the porridge must be neither too hot nor too cold, it is important to know when the temperature is just right.

From Democracy to Development also raises knotty questions about perspective. Social science theories of political change animate the analysis, while the thinking of Chinese officials is less prominent. This brings to mind a roundtable I was on at an Association of Asian Studies conference, which produced a special issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (July 2009). The most striking take-away of the presentations was that western-based scholars who examined protest among various social groups (workers, intellectuals, farmers, netizens, the middle class) all thought that the regime did not have too much to worry about pressures from below. Likewise, when I teach my course on “Collective Action in China,” we struggle every semester to avoid concluding that the regime is a finely-tuned machine—a master puppeteer that manages protest expertly—that knows how to gain the information it needs about social discontent without letting

the pot boil over (Lorentzen 2013; cf. Dimitrov 2015). But when interviewing local cadres about popular contention that is not typically their view. Many of them give off the impression that they are just trying to hang on and prevent anything too bad from happening that day. We should take this lack of stability confidence seriously, and also recognize, as Slater and Wong do (271), that officials at higher levels have not concluded that relying on repression has run its course. This is a reminder that although stability and victory confidence may be thought of as objective mindsets that authoritarian elites ought to possess in a particular situation, confidence also has a subjective, perceptual component that influences choices observers believe should or could be made but are not.

At the same time, we might ask if democracy (or not) is the right question for today's China, and whether it is always appropriate to give democratization pride of place as *the* other option once an authoritarian regime reaches a certain level of strength, the right mixture of ominous and reassuring signals appears, economic development slows, and performance legitimacy begins to wane. To be sure, exploring the authoritarianism-democracy choice is the authors' project. But what if democratization is not on the radar screen, at least for China's leaders? The Party does gesture at "whole process democracy" but that has little to do with the free and fair electoral competition that Slater and Wong rightly hold up as the *sine qua non* of democracy. Beyond that, as the authors recognize, "the prospects of democratic transition remain unlikely in China, even remote" (275). According to a recent analysis of reforms in the countryside, even village elections are dying (Hillman 2023). Moreover, other vexing problems are emerging in areas such as regulation (Yasuda 2023), and the regime's focus is not on enhancing responsiveness or the consultative institutions that received so much scholarly attention in the 2000s and early 2010s. This does not mean that assessing prospects for

democracy is irrelevant, but it is a reminder that democratization is a question posed by western social science (and, admittedly, the experience of many countries), but not by China's current leaders. This is reminiscent of the excitement surrounding village elections, which incidentally was not shared by a number of China scholars, some of whom recognized that "villagers' autonomy" was more concerned with state-building and re-penetrating the countryside than taking meaningful steps toward popular rule (O'Brien and Li 2000; Kelliher 1997). In other words, one need not posit a full-fledged "China model" (173) or be "apologists for the authoritarian regime" (173) to argue that many of the "myriad political and economic challenges" (270) China faces are unrelated to choosing between authoritarianism and democracy. If this is true, terms such as "democracy avoidance" (11) and "candidate cases" (12) for democracy may risk drawing attention away from the pressing issues that elites encounter every day.

When they critique scholars who contend that China and the Party "need not democratize" (173) or insist that democracy "is not a defining feature of a country's political modernization" (173), Slater and Wong come near to suggesting that democracy is a default end state, always lurking in the shadows, waiting to emerge when economic development, regime strength, and the right combination of ominous and reassuring signals call it to the stage. This could indeed be true in the long run, and Slater and Wong are always careful to distinguish between the immediate and more distant future. But these passages do mark a return to a more conventional version of modernization theory, and a question I often asked on Chinese politics exams in the 1990s: "Will economic reforms inevitably lead to political reform?" Futurology can find itself in a straitjacket if it rests on teleology (however winding the path is to an imagined end). The authors argue that "pressures for political reform cannot be forestalled forever" (vii) and "time is almost never on the autocrats' side" (299). That authoritarianism is inherently

unstable and impermanent may well prove to be true, but this was easier to maintain during the third wave of democratization and at the outset of the color revolutions and the Arab Spring than it is now, with democracy in retreat in many places and China leading the charge ideologically (and in practice) against the idea that electoral democracy is the only and inevitable way forward.

All these are minor quibbles with an ambitious and truly dazzling book. I have only considered Slater and Wong's discussion of China in a volume whose main contribution is to array twelve countries' economic and political transformation experiences in a creative and compelling way. That democratization is most likely when a regime is near or just past its apex of power, and that this moment can be missed, is a striking finding, and among transitions and reversed transitions, Slater and Wong make a persuasive case that they have identified a number of critical factors.

But questions persist about China, arguably their toughest "candidate case." Increasing repression, including suppression of zero-COVID protests, and mounting pressure on NGOs, outspoken lawyers, and the mildest dissenters, suggests that the Party has real, possibly justified concerns about stability and victory confidence. Popular support remains high but is shaken and steps toward opening could precipitate a petition and protest wave that a more consultative regime decided not to tolerate in the late 2000s (Li, Liu and O'Brien, 2012). Perhaps the "bittersweet spot" where a regime is strong enough to take a flyer on democracy has already passed as China becomes a surveillance state and its leaders believe they can preserve stability with a mixture of hard and soft repression. Pre-emptive democratization seems incredibly far away at a time when economic development is losing its juice as a legitimating strategy, but other non-electoral possibilities are taking its place, from national greatness to environmental renewal, to poverty alleviation and the reduction of inequality, to competition with a decadent, ineffective West. But

what then? Slater and Wong have given us a superb guide to what may come next if Xi-style rule falters and another form of authoritarianism does not replace it in the never-ending effort to realize China's dream of wealth and power.

Note

Kevin J. O'Brien is the Jack M. Forcey Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on the disaffected in Chinese society, and the strategies they use to improve their situation, as well as the front-line cadres who make political control real.

References

- Dimitrov, Martin K. 2015. "Internal Government Assessments of the Quality of Governance in China." *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 50-72.
- Hillman, Ben. 2023. "The End of Village Democracy in China." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 62-76.
- Kelliher, Daniel. 1997. "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government." *China Journal*, no. 37, pp. 63-86.
- Li, Lianjiang, Mingxing Liu and Kevin J. O'Brien. 2012. "Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003-2006." *China Quarterly*, 210, pp. 313-34.
- Lorentzen, Peter L. 2013. "Regularized Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 127-158.

O'Brien, Kevin J. and Lianjiang Li. 2000. "Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *China Quarterly*, no. 162, pp. 465-89.

Yasuda, John K. 2023. "Explaining Policy Failure in China," *China Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1017/S0305741023000711.