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# Prospects & Perspectives



Can Chinese-styled democracy sustain the Chinese Dream? Or, is a system that is tolerant, transparent, respectful of human rights, and restricts government power more sustainable? The jury is still out, but the contrast can only grow wider as time goes on.

Source: Voice of America, VOA, <<https://www.voachinese.com/a/china-taiwan-cross-strait-relations-20160316/3240895.html>>.

## *Can “Chinese-Styled Democracy” Sustain “the Chinese Dream”?*

“The Chinese Dream” is a vision formally put forward by Xi Jinping upon becoming the Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its 18th Congress in 2012. The Dream aspires to “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” with two specific goals to coincide with two centenaries: for China to become a “moderately well-off society” by 2021, the 100th anniversary of CCP, and to become a fully developed nation by 2049, the 100th

Mr. Raymond C-E Sung  
anniversary of the founding of the PRC. What is dreamed of is a China that will be strong on the world stage in every sense, from economics to military, and that will be civilized, with citizens of rich culture and high morals. It also aims at achieving a Harmonious Society, with high standard of living and social equity and fairness. On its surface, the Dream encourages an entrepreneurial spirit in calling people daring to dream big and work progressively, but the





similarity with the “American Dream” ends there.

China does not dream to become a “western-styled” liberal democracy. It has never denied this. In fact, what it aspires to is “democracy with Chinese characteristics”. This term can be understood as another way of asserting Chinese exceptionalism, emphasizing culture and needs specific to Chinese society, in justifying deviation from universal standards and established rules. In fact, Chinese exceptionalism is not limited to democracy: when you talk about human rights, the Chinese refer to efforts paid to the alleviation of poverty; when alleged of breaking international trade rules, they claim China is the defender of liberalism, with a tinge of laissez-faire; in maritime rights, it claims that long history exempts China from applicable rules. With democratic principles embedded in many modern principles of governance, the key question is, can the institutions of the Chinese state lead it to the realization of its Dream? Taiwan, with its intimate understanding of the Chinese mindset and recent experience in democratization, offers interesting counterpoints. A comparison will show the differences are deeper than institutional choices. They go deeper into culture and values.

### **The Governed, not the Master**

However defined, the idea that the government rules with the consent of the governed lies at the heart of democracy. This enshrines the principle of self-determination, according to which the people have a right to freely determine their political status and economic, social, and cultural development. In

terms of institutions, this means free and periodic elections, universal suffrage, multi-party politics, and separation of governmental powers.

What China is maintaining cannot be further from the above. The most striking characteristic is the centralization of powers into the hands of the ruling CCP. The latest constitutional amendments in 2018, which did away with the fixed tenure of the National President, brought it further towards concentration of powers in the few hands of those in the top positions. The justification raised for the lack of political rights and freedom includes the massive population, the technical difficulties in having participatory politics, the needs for raising people’s material standard of living, and the government’s ability to bring good to service its people. Basically that’s an idea stemming from traditional “enlightened despotism,” saying that the key to maintaining stable governing relations is for those who govern to deliver, not for the governed to rule themselves. Who decides what is to be delivered? Again, it is not the people but those in power.

In those areas, Taiwan has been pursuing a very different route in its full embrace of liberal democracy after stripping off authoritarian rule. While the general election of Parliament and direction election of the President have continued from the 80s and 90s, Taiwanese society recently has been practicing broadening of participatory decision-making and deepening of deliberative democracy. The results are a free and open society, transparent decision-making processes, lively civil society, and free even unbounded freedom of expression. Further, the people care



about fundamental rights, the rule of law, and pursuit of social justice. At its root is a thinking of limited government, so no one in the political scene is omnipotent. The ideas of limited government, open debates, and due process of decision-making sometimes are difficult for the Chinese mindset, which often accuses the ruling party in Taiwan of “manipulating” the public. This misunderstanding can only be explained by the different experiences with democratic practices.

### **Right to Dissent**

The next stark contrast resulting from different experiences with democracy between Taiwan and China is in the area of political dissent. What marks China as different from any other country is its recent practices in tightening control of civil liberties, even the general behavior of its own citizens, through its ruthless implementation of law backed up by high-tech appliances. The control of internet information – the Chinese Great Firewall – has long been infamous. The suppression of civil and political expression, association, and gathering is strict. The media is required to carefully observe the Party line. Its cities boast the highest coverage of monitors in the world, equipped with face recognition efficient enough for the purpose of implementing full-scale social credit system. Dissidents are being prosecuted for high crimes of subversion, their names and advocacy are being censored, and their whereabouts are being removed from public knowledge. Cases in point include Liu Xiaobo and 709 lawyers. Foreign nationals who cross the official line are warned, expelled, denied entry, or (in the case of Taiwanese NGO activist Li Ming-Che) arrested

and jailed.

In contrast, anything goes in Taiwan’s idea arena. There are now fewer and fewer incidents of interference of expression by public powers. People often do not agree with each other but in general respect the right of others to express their opinions. In fact, the lack of regulation leaves room for fake news and rumors to grow. The weakness of an open society is being exploited, sometimes to the risks of national security.

### **What a Rising China Represents**

The concentration of power in China carries external implications as well, namely, what a rising China will bring to the international community. The remarkable economic growth of China has been partly aided by state capitalism, but the activities of those big enterprises have given rise to concerns of ruthless competition and disregard of rules, including theft of trade secrets and key technologies. China’s large-scale land reclamation is another case in point, an activity that was possible only with concentration of resources at the state level, in disregard of international law. Its grand project of One Belt, One Road continued previous policies of resource grabbing, and it has already given rise concerns of deepening economic dependency. Actions against Taiwan in the international arena were also possible only by ruthless exertion of raw power, even to the degree of requiring transnational businesses to comply with Chinese law entailing its political correctness.

Suppression of democracy in China has serious consequences. Concentration of power at such a high degree, and the use of power in





disregard of rules are natural consequences of a lack of democracy in domestic affairs and a culture emphasizing material achievements and playing down of humanistic values. The “Chinese Dream” epitomized those. The international community came to this realization only recently, and maybe too late.

On the other hand, Taiwan has travelled along the road of democratization for almost 30 years. It is still a young democracy, and it is far from perfect. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese people are not turning back.

Can Chinese-styled democracy sustain the Chinese Dream? Or, is a system that is tolerant, transparent, respectful of human rights, and restricts government power more sustainable? The jury is still out, but the contrast can only grow wider as time goes on.

*(Mr. Sung is DPhil Candidate in Law,  
Oxford University)*

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**Prospect Foundation  
No. 1, Lane 60, Sec. 3, Tingzhou Rd., Zhongzheng District  
Taipei City, 10087, Republic of China (Taiwan)  
Tel: 886-2-2365-4366 Fax: 886-2-23679193  
<http://www.pf.org.tw>**