China is an interesting exception to Huntington’s theory of political democracy which states that the higher the level of economic development of a given country, the greater its chance of political democracy. In its history, China has gone through a civil war, invasion and occupation, a revolutionary modernization, a radical reversal from communism to a version of capitalism, and recently, extraordinary rates of economic growth. Huntington in *The Third Wave—Democratization In The Late Twentieth Century* claims that economic development is the basis of political democracy. China’s political democracy has been ambiguous so far, and somewhat of a dichotomy. The Chinese are not explicitly confrontational against their leaders or the establishment, but there has been growing evidence of a slow but steadily rising opposition against the powers in rule. While this is not definitively indicative of a democracy, it is certainly suggestive of one. There are three factors that justify such thinking. The first is the increasing influence of the private sector on the Chinese economy; the second is the rising political participation by the people of China; the third is the willingness of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) to change. All of these factors point to a deep rooted change in traditional thinking that suggest that democracy in China within the near future is not an impossibility.

Many experts claim that political democracy and economic growth are two sides of the same coin. The emerging dominance of the private sector is a crucial explanation for why one would expect China to transition towards a more democratic state of affairs. It is an important indicator underlying the impending change towards a more democratic China. The private sector has long been a passive participant in the Chinese economy. Shackled by government bureaucracy, Chinese businesses were never able to fully reach their true potential. In recent times however, their impact on the Chinese economy has been noteworthy, which is a testament to the decreasing restrictions and influence of the government on the private sector. This is a significant development as it indicates increasing autonomy and independence of the private sector—a characteristic typical of more open political structures.

Let us first examine all of the economic policies that have taken place in China. Then we shall analyze if any of these economic policies have had a bearing on the political democracy in the region. The rapid rate of economic growth has liberalized the economy to a certain extent. Rapid development has in turn forced the Chinese government to enact major reforms in the areas of housing, business and government. One of the key economic reforms introduced by the central government was the rapid decentralization of local governments and businesses. Previously, the Chinese government invested public funds in private businesses in order to have controlling power over key decisions. However, this trend has decreased significantly, as depicted in the China’s industrial output by the Type of Enterprise graph (China Industry Economy Statistical Yearbook; China Statistical Yearbook).

Between 1997 and 2007, the private sector accounted for nearly all of China’s net employment growth (Gilboy and Read, 3). This highlights a major shift in the attitude of the Chinese people. Once puppets in the hands of the government, smaller, privately owned firms are now becoming self-organized and proactive. Gilboy and Read give an example of a business association in the eastern city of Wenzhou that worked closely with the local government in order to develop and enforce quality standards after hearing complaints of Wenzhou-produced products. Some of the most effective lobbyists are state firms, including tobacco and energy companies (Gilboy & Read, 4). Another interesting and similar decentralization reform has also occurred in housing. In the 1960’s, most of China’s urban population lived in state-owned homes. Between 1960 and 2000, most of these homes were sold at market rates. Today, over 460 million people own their own homes. From organizing condominium resident boards, to protesting against shoddy construction, homeowners are quickly becoming a potent force to reckon with. From organizing condominium resident boards, to protesting against shoddy construction, homeowners are quickly becoming a potent force to reckon with, due to privatization and the increasingly market driven demand for these homes. (Gilboy & Read, 5). Agricultural de-collectivization, another major reform initiated by the government, geared the agricultural sector towards a more competitive and market-based environment. The combination of a greater decentralization in areas such as housing, private businesses and local governments along with higher employment and education rates have made the Chinese society more aggressive in demanding their rights.

Increasing participation by the people is a suggestive second indicator of political awareness in a country. The Chinese are in-
dulging in more demonstrative behaviors to voice their opinions. There has been a change in attitudes, put more simply, a role reversal where the government serves the people instead of the people serving the government. This shift in perspective by itself justifies the claim made by those who believe China’s political future lies in democracy.

In his book Political Participation in Beijing, Tianjin Shi is in agreement with the above perception that the servile attitude with which the Chinese people once looked upon their government exists no more. Shi paints a picture of a dynamic, feisty, and aggressive population determined to pursue its interests—even if it has to resist the government in doing so. While Shi stays clear of making strong claims about the current political state of China, he is quick to emphasize that contrary to popular belief, dramatic displays of opposition and resistance are not a prerequisite for meaningful mass involvement in politics.

Shi disagrees with the notion that the Chinese are politically apathetic. His survey of 757 Beijing inhabitants, conducted in 1988, reveals that there is a level of political awareness. Most of the people Shi interviewed were genuinely interested in politics—with only a tenth of the people deemed to be apathetic. O’Brien supports this point when he concludes that “a full three quarters of the respondents had undertaken at least one voluntary political act other than voting, between 1983 and 1988.” (O’Brien, 160). As previously mentioned, Shi does not make any judgments about the state of political democracy in China. Rather, he concentrates on how local attitudes are changing, which enables the Chinese to participate in politics.

Gilboy and Read provide two examples that explicitly highlight the newfound political activism and awareness of the Chinese people. In 2003, Lu Jun set up a website informing people of how they could protect themselves from employment discrimination against people with Hepatitis B. Lu Jun founded Yirenping Zhanzhuo a website for Hepatitis B carriers. The group developed a savvy strategy for lobbying representatives to the National People Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Yirenping Zhanzhuo secured support for legal protection from some of China’s official alternative political parties. The new employment protection act took effect on January 1, 2008, forbidding employers from discriminating against Hep-B carriers.

Gilboy and Read provide another example of political activism in the Chinese people involving the public outcry over a white collar Chinese migrant who was beaten to death for not carrying the right identification papers. The case received media attention and public condemnation and caused the government to issue a new administrative regulation titled, “Relief Methods for Vagrants and Beggars.” These examples are instances of greater resistance and expression of dissatisfaction by the people. This opposition has revealed itself in the form of individuals increasingly opposing the establishment they work in, which is shown in the Political Participation in Beijing diagram (Shi, 155).

O’Brien argues that Shi’s book seems more an analysis of what people are willing to risk in order to attain democracy rather than a description of the Chinese attitudes towards democracy. He contends that Shi shies away from making any strong claims that there is, of yet, no substantial strategic path to democracy. O’Brien criticizes the idea underlying the term “political opportunity structure” that Shi coins to describe the notion that given the opportunity to resist, the Chinese will retaliate. The “political opportunity structure” clarifies what the leadership will allow and prevent; the popular response to cycles of opening (jia) and closing (chao) of the political system, and the realm in which the Chinese can operate to achieve their aims. It is up to savvy individuals to exploit the changing authoritarian system to their minimum disadvantage. This, O’Brien argues, suggests that the government has a ceiling on the amount of opposition it will tolerate, and citizens are expected to operate within that space. This does not fit Shi’s representation of a dynamic and aggressive China.

O’Brien’s second criticism of Shi’s study is his sample selection. According to O’Brien, Shi’s study is flawed because his sample is unrepresentative of China’s beliefs. Beijing residents differ from the rest of the Chinese population in their attitudes and ideology. Shi’s sample does not take into account the beliefs of people living in villages or in less developed cities. O’Brien states, “[Beijing’s] citizens are considered the most political, sophisticated and outspoken people in the country… a small survey conducted during a liberal interregnum is hardly definitive” (O’Brien, 163).

The third criticism leveled against Shi’s analysis can be explained, using the diagram of increasing opposition (Shi, 155). The increase in percentages of people creating resistance, are mostly individualized cases. These are less reactionary, cautious forms of resistance. When it comes to more explicit acts of defiance against an establishment, such as organizing people to fight against leaders or persuading others to attend campaign or briefing meetings at the workplace, the opposition seems to decrease, the diagram shows a decrease in opposition (Shi, 155). This brings us to O’Brien’s last criticism. He argues that regime challenging actions are rare and that protest activities are usually individualized and “directed against work unit leaders rather than the political system itself” (O’Brien, Pg.165). Gilboy and Read echo similar sentiments: “The Xioman and Shanghai [protest] walks illustrate how new social groups … continue to adapt, and experiment with ways to act on new interests, while avoiding or preventing direct challenges to CCP rule.” (Gilboy and Read, 6). O’Brien’s last argument is that because political resistance is uneven, weak and fragile, it cannot be taken seriously enough to make the claim that China is becoming more politically democratic. There needs to be a systematic and organized approach to democracy, which currently does not exist. These viewpoints are affirmed by the trend of decreasing support of democracy in PRC regions as opposed to other regions (Chu and Chang, 332-33).

Yun Feiyang from the Epoch Times injects a gloomy dose of economic reality, “…the standard of living in China is one of the lowest in the world…in big cities in China, there are cars everywhere, however 90% of them are made in the US, Korea and Japan. The financial gap between town and country is unbelievably large, and half of the farmers in China live in poverty”. It seems as though the flickering flames of political democracy in China have only promoted the popular view that some get rich first.

A personal opinion is that the trend shown in the PRC diagram is not an accurate depiction of the attitudes of the Chinese people towards democracy today (Chu and Chang, 332-33). While O’Brien and Gilboy & Read criticize that no substantial developments towards a legitimate democracy have taken place, they fail to acknowledge that the change that has taken place is by itself a substantial improvement. The reverent attitude, with which the
Chinese once looked upon their government, has all but disappeared. Where does this stand with regards to Huntington’s theory of economic development? While Huntington’s theory cannot be proved in entirety, it is applicable to a certain extent. The reason why the theory may be only partially accurate is that we may have caught China in a transition mode. This transition mode probably explains the reason why the attitudes held by the Chinese towards political democracy are dichotomous in nature, almost a passive form of resistance.

With regards to Feiyang’s commentary on the economic situation of his country, one could argue that these issues are, unfortunately, not unique to China alone. The OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation Countries) states, “Income inequality rose twice as fast in Japan as in other rich countries between the mid 80s and 2000.” China is still on a lower rung of the economic ladder in comparison with nations such as US, Korea and Japan; it is unfair to level criticisms of economic disparity against China when it has not yet realized its full potential economically, and even more so politically.

Reform is inevitable in any country. The Chinese leadership realizes that the fundamental thinking used to underlie the people’s subservient attitude has all but disappeared. The recognition (by the CCP) that there is a need to reform is, by itself, a significant indication of greater flexibility in the political structure—a feature typified by democracies. This is the third indicator that not only highlights a shift in traditional Chinese views on what role a government should play, but more crucially emphasizes CCP’s willingness to change.

The CCP is realizing that it needs to change with its citizens if it wants to continue remaining in power. In the words of Gilboy and Read, “...the CCP must change in order to survive, with a renewed focus on improving legitimacy, transparency and governing capacity in response to a changing society” (5). The authors make the argument that the CCP has already changed quite a bit since it took a turn away from totalitarianism in 1978. CCP now has an intra-party promotion mechanism, where education and competence rather than personal loyalty are the important criteria for promotion. Gilboy and Read state that “[t]he government has become more institutionalized, ensuring that power and policies are linked to specific offices and government positions rather than personalities.” Gilboy and Read predict that in the future, the reforms that the Chinese government decides to implement will be determined by its citizens, and that the citizens’ reactions to these policies, will determine future reforms. This will, in essence, create a two way policy arrangement.

The argument that CCP’s change is inevitable is a logical one. The party has to change in order to survive because there are pressures pulling at the government from many different sides. As stated by Gilboy and Read, “Demands on the leadership are emerging from new proprietors such as private businesses, homeowners, environmentalists...migrant laborers and poor farmers who feel that they too share a personal stake in China’s future” (Gilboy and Read, 6). These different pressures tugging at the CCP from different sides are coercing it into changing in order to accommodate people’s demands. However, for this change to occur, the nation will have to be exposed even more to the dividing conflicts of interest between the party and its people, making the existing schisms more obvious. The CCP is attempting greater legitimacy and transparency by having intra-party elections, but to come up to Western standards of democracy is a “long (and) potentially tumultuous path” (Gilboy and Read). It is unclear what Gilboy and Read see as a tangible future for China. They do not make any generalizations, but merely express their opinion that the path to democracy for China, while beneficial, will not be an easy transition.

It is important to study how democracy would affect China in different scenarios. In his article in Asia Policy, Cheng Li presents three different future political scenarios for China in the year 2020. The first scenario is that of a new emerging and democratic China; the second scenario is that of a nation plagued by prolonged chaos due to the persisting problem of economic disparity. The third scenario is a resilient and more authoritarian China. Li predicts that the first scenario will come about by the increasing number of checks and balances within the ruling party. He separates the ruling party into the elitist group, terming them as China’s “red states”, which represent the interests of the coastal region and the populist coalition or China’s “blue states”, which voice the concerns of the inland region. Li argues that these two groups are equally powerful, and that the politics of China dividing itself over these two main political groups in the future is not hard to envision. He notes: “it is not difficult to imagine that the CCP will split along the lines of an elitist coalition and a populist coalition…largely because of the incremental nature of this institutional development, this split can be achieved in a non violent way.” In 2020, the elections and competition within the CCP may extend to general elections in the country, which consequently, Li argues, will increase intra-party democracy to give birth to a constitutional democracy.

The second scenario highlighted is that of prolonged and continued violence. Li cites several factors for what could set off such a scenario. The tension between local and central governments, global financial crises, conflicting interests between civilian and military groups, ethnic factions and the military confrontation across the Taiwan strait are just some of the triggering factors that could cause a dip in economic and political stability in China. Li predicts a dire situation where “the central government loses its control over provincial administrations, the CCP no longer functions, the military splits, civil war breaks out hoodlums who cause looting all over the country and a massive Chinese exodus leads migrants to every corner of the world.” The third situation predicts a more resilient and authoritarian China. The CCP’s ability to change so easily might actually make them more sustainable in the future. Their flexibility is a reason why China could become a resilient authoritarianism.

All of these scenarios are unlikely in my opinion. The CCP can only adapt to a certain extent. There will come a point when the fast changing attitudes and beliefs of people will be so beyond CCP’s basic ability to change that there will be a clash between the core and fundamental values of the CCP, and the new ideas held by the people. The third scenario is too optimistic in predicting that a transition from a traditional party to a party that changes at the whim and mercy of its people will occur easily. In contrast, the second situation is too dire a prediction and reaches no resolute end. It is simply a prediction of mass violence and threat to people’s sovereignty. That is likely to happen for some time if there were any triggering factors such as war or a clash in two extreme values (like the one between a party and the people), however it is unlikely that this chaos will go unresolved. The second seems more of a means in achieving some greater political outcome, rather than be-
ing an end in itself. Scenario one assumes too easy and smooth of a transition from communism to constitutional democracy. The mere presence of two equally powerful parties does not imply democracy. There are likely to be conflicts of interest as the country decides to transform its very inveterate beliefs in communism to a constitution it has always opposed, democracy. One thing that is clear, however, is that there will be division and opposition to whatever decisions China decides to undertake in the future. It is therefore important to understand that the three scenarios can only be simplified versions of what China could become in the year 2020.

China does not disprove Huntington's theory. It does not entirely prove it either. What it does affirm, however, is that it is somewhere in the middle. The burgeoning passive resistance of its people, coupled with CCP's willingness to change, is by itself a remarkable deviation from the Chinese people's traditional views towards democracy. It is only a matter of time before the global community waits and watches to see whether Huntington's theory disproves or unravels the mystery of the Chinese conundrum.

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