



China and Democracy: Many Views

Leading Luminaries Discuss Modern China

By PEGGY SPITZER CHRISTOFF

The 2003-2004 holder of the Henry Alfred Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the Library of Congress, Lanxin Xiang, organized a panel this spring to explore the question of whether democracy is an important component of China's political system. The discussion was held at the Library on May 6.

A professor of international history and politics at the Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales in Geneva, Xiang has written three books in English and two in Chinese on historical variables in China's entry into a nation-state system.

At the start of the discussion, Xiang posed the following four questions to the members of the panel, which consisted

of five very different scholars and political commentators.

First, what is the relationship between tradition and democracy vis-à-vis the "cultural resources" required for democracy?

Second, if Chinese tradition is unique, how are we to understand the differences in political development between Hong Kong and Taiwan?

Third, how do you assess the current Chinese leadership?

And fourth, what are the implications of China's political system in the realm of foreign policy?

Below is a brief summary of the panel members' responses. The author invites your comments on these topics as well; send them by e-mail to pech@loc.gov.

James Leach



Rep. James Leach (R-Iowa), one of the architects of the Taiwan Relations Act, which defined Taiwan as part of China and led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1979, is chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Committee on International Relations. Leach believes that it is very difficult to promote democracy in a hostile environment and that "democracy" is an alien concept to most Chinese. He proposed the idea that the American Revolution is an appropriate model for China in terms of "bottom-up reconstruction"—and that the American Revolution was more revolutionary than the Marxist-Leninist revolution, because the latter was a top-down initiative.

Leach maintains that most non-Chinese do not understand the importance of state and local levels of governance in China, which he characterizes as the impetus for fundamental change. In the Tiananmen democracy movement in 1989, he observed, the students' definition of "democracy" focused on getting rid of corruption and favoritism among elite factions in the Chinese Communist Party.

Of Taiwan, Leach said that caution is a fundamental priority in U.S. foreign policy. While all Americans support Taiwan's sovereignty, "security

comes best with political ambiguity." That is, keeping the status quo allows Taiwan self-determination and decreases the chances of violence. He pointed out that Congress stands with President Bush in advocating restraint on both sides and promoting "people to people" exchanges for both Taiwan and China. In U.S. foreign policy, Leach advocates a course of effective management of bilateral relationships.

Tu Wei-Ming



Tu Wei-Ming, professor of Chinese history, philosophy and Confucian studies and director of the Yenching Institute at Harvard University—established in 1928 to support student exchanges between the United States and China—looks to the European Enlightenment to discuss Chinese democracy and sees both liberty and justice as universal values that are integral to a market economy. Tu points out that, in contrast to Western values, Confucian ethics advocate a strong central government (formerly defined through the "mandate of heaven") to support the development of harmonious relationships within the family, among scholars and for self-cultivation. According to Tu, the development and implementation of Chinese communism between 1949 and 1979 broke down the Confucian value system, but it is now re-emerging.

Tu believes that the "one country, two systems" approach that seems to be working in Hong Kong will not work in Taiwan. He defines China's relationship with Taiwan as symbiotic and one that, in the present day, is "overheating." Further, he maintains that a positive outcome in the confrontation could occur if both sides engage in a constructive dialogue about core Confucian values.

Carma Hinton



Carma Hinton, who was born on the eve of the Communist Revolution in 1949 in Beijing and lived there with her family until 1971, had much to say about current images of Chinese democracy. Her father, William Hinton, was a prominent China scholar who wrote about village life in Long Bow, China, in a book titled "Fanshen." Carma Hinton has produced award-winning documentary films, including "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," about the Tiananmen democracy movement in 1989, and "Morning Sun," which reveals the complexities of the Chinese Cultural Revolution during the period 1966 and 1968.

Hinton asserts—a view that may be surprising to many in the United States—that the highest-level leaders in China want democracy, but their position is complicated by the reports of the U.S. media. For example, the Tiananmen student demonstrations in

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1989 demonized the Chinese leadership when, according to Hinton, there were zealots on both sides. Prominent student leaders wanted a top-down system of governance no different from the current form but with a different set of Chinese leaders.

Hinton believes that if bottom-up (read "grass roots") democracy is to have a chance in China, it has to address the tangible question of property rights. Hinton cautions that democracy is a learning process and that, because of the growing numbers of local bureaucrats, especially in rural areas, there is huge resistance to personal property ownership.

She finds encouraging the resurfacing of previously banned books and believes that, in the present day, it is almost impossible to have real censorship in China. She sees political debates emerging in China but notes that the Western press is unlikely to pick up on this.

William Kristol

William Kristol, political analyst, commentator and editor of "The Weekly Standard," who is known for his neo-conservative stance on issues relating to U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy, asserts that all countries have cultural resources for democracy just as all countries have traditions

that are incompatible with democracy. He points out that Western Christian roots, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, were not democratic. Kristol believes that the current relationship between China and Taiwan is unsustainable precisely because it is outdated: the "one China policy" was developed at a time when Taiwan was not a democracy. Now that Taiwan holds elections and has a vibrant economy to support democracy, the United States must remove itself as the protector of Taiwan against China.

Kristol stated that the development of a civil society in Hong Kong will not occur, because the Chinese leadership is hostile to anything outside of its control. He cited Bruce Gilley's book "China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead" as a blueprint for change and disagrees with what he believes to be a fashionable notion that one must "downplay the importance of democracy."

Donald Munro

Donald Munro, professor emeritus of Chinese philosophy at the University of Michigan and author of "The Concept of Man in Contemporary China" (2002), believes that democracy is a style of practical problem-solving in which "freedom of speech" provides the opportunity for rational decision-making. He cited two examples in which a lack of an objective reality in China led to disaster: in

the 1950s, when China attempted to adopt wholesale a Soviet model and promoted uncontrolled population growth; and in 1998, when the lack of proper planning led to major flooding of the Daqing oilfields. Munro believes that, in order for change to occur, the Chinese educational system of rote learning needs to be replaced by a system that encourages independent, autonomous thinking. He finds a basis for the latter in the Confucian Analects, which promote the preservation of family relationships within the larger context of Chinese society.

Xiang Lanxin



Xiang, who brought together this group of scholars to discuss the Chinese political situation, has yet another view of democracy in China. First, he does not believe that the American "language of democracy" translates in a Chinese cultural framework; and second, that the European concept of democracy, implemented through the development of communities such as the European Union, is closer to the Chinese framework than the U.S. preoccupation with individualism and unilateral foreign policy.

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