

Jiwei Ci. *Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019, x + 420 pages.
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In *Democracy in China*, Jiwei Ci, representing an insider's view, delivers a message from within China about its democratic future. According to him, a legitimation crisis is on the way as China rises rapidly and steadily as a global economic superpower. He argues that China's economic development is engendering the crisis, as severe political inequality conflicts with the rough social equality brought by economic development. In his words, the "nation's collective existence [is] splitting against itself," (p. 21) because the citizens are leading two distinctive forms of life simultaneously. Prudentially speaking, China needs democracy. The book provides a detailed philosophical analysis of why this is the case.

In no small part, the book builds on Tocqueville's idea that whenever one can take for granted equality in one domain of society, that very equality will not be confined to stay where it is. Sooner or later, it will exert impact on another domain. As Tocqueville puts it, whenever there is "equality of conditions," there is the momentum in society toward political equality. Such a society, then, requires political democracy to ease the tension. In China, however, such a trend is deliberately blocked by the CCP. Ci argues that this effort on the part of the party is a cause of deep worry, since a crisis of legitimation will soon stare China in the face.

Ci explains that as the CCP steers China ever closer to the capitalist way of thinking and acting, moving in the process away from its socialist legacy, "teleological-revolutionary legitimacy" will stop to function. Performance legitimacy, for a time, may fill the vacuum, but it can only be sustained for a while. It cannot be a long-term solution because good performance, at best, can only temporarily stave off the matter of real legitimacy. As popular saying, "lifting the bowl and fetching the meat, putting down the chopsticks and cursing the mother (*duanqiwan chirou, fangxia kuaizi maniang*)," suggests, just as the meat is not

sufficient to legitimize the agent who provides it, so good performance is never good enough to cope with the lack of legitimacy. Ci analyzes the close relations between legitimacy and performance in the Chapter One.

To the extent that there is the legitimation crisis, Ci argues that the CCP needs to act before it is too late. Why the CCP, rather than the ordinary Chinese citizens? Ci believes that the CCP has to be a major player in changing the political direction of the country. First, the CCP still enjoys widespread allegiance of the ordinary Chinese citizens so that it will stay in power in the foreseeable future. Its continuing rule, however, will depend on how successful it faces the legitimation crisis. Second, given that no other political force can possibly rule over such a vast country, it is unimaginable that political democratization in China can proceed without the party playing a leading role. It is "the only legally permitted political force, certainly the only political force that has ruled China, and hence has gained any experience of ruling, since 1949." (p. 23) It would be politically unrealistic to expect that some other force could force the CCP off the stage, if China were to embrace democracy, democracy in the specific sense that Ci elaborates in Chapter Three. It may of course be contentious and controversial when he claims that we (those who are concerned with China) should allow and encourage the CCP to initiate the reform.

It should be pointed out that in arguing for such a reform on a prudential basis, Ci does not leave the ordinary Chinese citizen out of the picture. For him, China needs a morally matured civil society, consisting of both individual and societal moral maturity and a reasonable degree of respect for the law, in order to implement political democratization. In order to achieve that, individual Chinese citizens need to require independent moral agency that is constitutive of a matured civil life. There is no contradiction when he says

that China is already in some sense a democratic society, even though independent moral agency is still missing. For him, a society can enjoy a degree, even a considerable degree, of social equality, even if individuals in that society are still at mercy of the political force, which makes the formation of independent individual agency difficult. It is Ci's argument that the CCP has single-handedly created a situation where individuals do *not* have the necessary resources, both experiential and interpretive, to constitute independent agency. Hence the disjuncture between the *de facto* existence of individuals and the lack of resources that nurture independent moral agency. Such a disjuncture accounts for the moral crisis in China today, a theme that Ci's previous book has already expounded. To the extent that such moral agency is lacking, Ci holds that China has to go through democratic preparation.

This coexistence of *de facto* individuals and the lack of independent agency can be described as the hampered "equality of conditions." It is a situation characteristic of China: if there is uncoupling of the social and the political in the democratic West, the same uncoupling is anything but complete in the one-party state of China. This situation

makes China vulnerable to the legitimation crisis. But it may also make it uniquely suited to deal with the problems that come with democracy: the dehumanizing and anti-democratic forces of capitalism. In Chapters Four and Eight, Ci addresses this very possibility by unpacking the complex relations between democracy and capitalism. But whether China can really bring about a happier and more productive union of the two will largely depend on China's determination with regard to implementing political democratization.

The book provides a Chinese philosopher's view of China, offering carefully structured and densely argued ideas. Through the work, we witness a China running into an impending crisis, and thus facing a highly uncertain future. It should be of interest to those who are looking for a systemic analysis of China's political conditions and future with reference to its democratic possibilities.

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