Change of Political Order in China and the US-China Relations

Jia Han

1GlobalPolities

May 05, 2020

Abstract

Current research on China’s political order and the US-China relations lacks deep reflection in political philosophy. The prevalent theory on democratization assumes that as the economy grows to a certain level, a nation will start democratic transition. Such a view is too western-centric since it does not take into account religion, history and institutions in non-western nations. This article considers Aristotle’s Politics, Plato’s Republic, and Hegel philosophy and applies them to change of political order. This study shows complexity and difficulties of change of political order in China. I argue that a multi-steps transition to democracy in China is likely a better approach. The world order and the US-China relations also need completely rethinking.

Introduction

The rise of China is the most consequential world event in the last forty years. This rise poses a huge challenge to the current world order. Will the new China willingly integrate into the current world order? Or is it necessary to devise a new world order? Although China rising has been the subject of extensive study, few have considered it from the political philosophical viewpoint. As a result, international relations involving China are largely ad hoc and reactive. Take the US-China relationship as an example. A good survey on the US-China relations can be found in (Friedberg 2012). It identifies several inflection points of the US-China relations, each of which was a reaction to certain historical events not internal logic. Until recently the US policy toward China assumed that as China’s economy grows its ordinary people will demand more political participation. Eventually democracy will take hold in China. This line of thinking presupposes that China will take the same political evolutionary path as the US has taken. Many US politicians, academics, diplomats, and businessmen now realize that such an assumption is problematic. In a recent speech assistant secretary of State Department David R. Stilwell (Stilwell 2019) reflected on the history of US-China relations. In summary, we tried to help China but it did not work out. What policy the US should take toward China is being debated right now (for links to two open letters and comments on them see (Pomfret 2019)).
This study ventures deep in political philosophy. Aristotle’s classic *Politics* implies two metrics on changing political orders. Aristotle’s goal is the best political order according to political science. Aristotle’s goal requires comparison of different political orders, one better while the other worse. For such comparison I use the criterion of Hegel philosophy, i.e. freedom of people. Changing from one political order to another is often associated with costs which can be money, suffering, pride, etc. I call such costs Aristotle’s barrier (against change).

In Book IV of *Politics* Aristotle studied change of political order together with Aristotle’s barrier. Several democracies and several oligarchies are optimal or suboptimal (not optimal but Aristotle’s barrier prevents change). Plato’s *Republic* goes beyond *Politics*. Political orders considered by Aristotle and Plato are secular. Religion adds another dimension to potential political orders. Confucianism is the religion of ancient China. For purpose of contrast, impact of Christianity and Islam on political orders are considered briefly. The New Testament transcends any political order, thus can be interpreted as compatible with secularism and liberal democracy. On the other hand, Islam has its own political ideal, which is incompatible with democracy, at least superficially. Confucianism dominated Chinese politics in the past. Because most Chinese are pragmatic and no longer revere Confucianism, it is possible for China to adopt democracy. On the other hand, Marxism has replaced Confucianism as the leading ideology in China. Marxism has a totalitarian tendency, which strongly limits freedom of ordinary people. Democratic transition of China will be difficult with a very high Aristotle’s barrier. In view of this, it is wise for China to consider a two or three stages transition instead of one big, direct transition to democracy.

It is often said that the current world order is liberal. Its underlying political philosophy is influenced by Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 2007). The problem is that Kant’s essay assumes that all states are republics, which is far from the real world. The world order that we aim for should be a realistic abstraction of the real world, somewhat better but achievable. Here is my conjecture. The new world order will have two pillars: the US and China, supplemented by additional powers: Europe, Japan and Russia.

The rest of this article is as follows. Section 2 reviews various political orders and Hegel philosophy. In section 3, importance, and difficulties for China, of the Rule of Law is explained. Religion might play a major role in political order. Selected religions and their political ideals are considered in section 4. Section 5 is devoted to the change of political order in China. The new world order and the US-China relations are considered in section 6. Section 7 concludes.

**Political Philosophy and Political Orders: An Overview**

In this section, I will explain two metrics that appeared in Aristotle’s *Politics* and a brief account of Hegel philosophy. Hegel philosophy is needed for comparison of political orders and for political evolution. The discussion indicates a small number of stable political orders which are either optimal or suboptimal. They may be useful for the change of political order in China in section 5.

### 2.1 Aristotle’s goals

When considering change of political order, we need some metrics. Aristotle’s classic *Politics* in essence has provided them. In Book 2.1 of *Politics* (Aristotle and Jowett 2001,15), Aristotle states “Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all for those who are most able to realize their ideal of life.” I will refer to this *Aristotle’s goal*. The ultimate goal of political science is to find the best political community or best political order. The term political community is broader than political order. For simplicity, I do not distinguish them in this article.

It is difficult to achieve Aristotle’s goal in the real world because it involves both political philosophy and many social sciences. For example, except in very small communities divisions of labor are important. Who should have what job and who makes such decisions? What about financial rewards? In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates pointed out different jobs need different, innate talents to do one type of job and one type only (Strauss and Guilden 1975, 160-161). Divisions of labor in a modern society require both innate talent as
well as education and training, which makes things much more complicated than ancient Greece. Suppose someone has the innate talent of a great neurosurgeon. A neurosurgeon needs extensive education and training. If his/her family does not have the resources or is not willing to pay, what should one do? The same may also apply to a violin virtuoso or an athlete. Should the government play a role in identifying talents and/or pay for education? These are just one type of example. What if a person’s ideal is different from his/her innate talent?

2.2. Comparing Political Orders in Hegel Philosophy

Aristotle’s goal makes sense only if there is some way to measure the goodness of a political order. Is a political order better than another? In what sense? Hegel philosophy regards freedom of citizens the most important good, which leads to evolution of political order. Freedom of ordinary people will be used in this article.

Some might argue that freedom is hard to measure. Therefore, they may prefer utilitarianism promoted by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and others. Utilitarianism measures some concrete benefits while freedom characterizes soul or spirit which are not readily measurable. However, I suspect that utilitarianism is not general enough. Freedom is good and it is possible to show its usefulness. It can be shown that long term economic growth needs freedom. However, this would require extensive work that is beyond this article.

Peter Singer provides a good exposition of Hegel’s philosophy (Singer 1983). Hegel views the history of human communities not as meaningless random movement but with a purpose (Singer 1983, 9-23). Hegel viewed ‘the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.’ Hegel studied the history of major civilizations. By ‘Oriental World’ Hegel meant China, India, and ancient Persia. Hegel regards them ‘stationary civilisation’, i.e., they stuck fast after reaching a certain point of their development. In oriental society, only one person — the ruler — is a free individual. All others are totally lacking in freedom, because they must subject their will to that of the ruler. Hegel went on to consider Greek world, Roman world, and German world.

Details of Hegel philosophy are beyond the scope of this article. Hegel’s point is that China’s political order remained stationary for millennia while the West kept advancing political freedom, though not always in a straight line. Based on Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel philosophy, Francis Fukuyama proposed the The End of History thesis (Fukuyama, 2006). Its main point is that from a historical viewpoint, political order evolves progressively. This evolution of political order will reach an end and the end is liberal democracy.

Fukuyama’s End of History thesis is interesting. However, it does not apply to China, at least not yet and not in the near future. Hegel developed his philosophy in the setting of nineteenth century Christian Germany (Solomon 1985; Beiser 2005; Singer 1983). Hegel’s reasoning and deduction is partially based on human nature, for example lord and servant relationship, and partially on his dialectic. Hegel’s dialectic is driven by Geist. Geist is a German word, a mixture of human spirit and Holy spirit (Singer 1983, 45-46). There is no such thing as Geist in a non-Christian civilization. Therefore, Hegel’s dialectic does not apply to non-Christian civilizations, Chinese politics specifically. Also Solomon notes that Hegel’s dialectic is only a metaphor (Solomon 1985, 21-22).

However, freedom of ordinary people may still be used as a measurement for a political order regardless of civilization. Freedom of people may be located on a path which I refer to as a Hegel Path. On a Hegel Path, the leftmost point indicates primitive societies and the rightmost point liberal democracy. Note the term path here is not an ordinary path. I use the term path because of the lack of a good alternative. Two points to note here. First, it will be shown shortly that there could be several rightmost points. It is difficult to compare them with liberal democracy directly. Second, sometimes freedom of people is hard to quantify and/or compare. If a state has N people, freedom of people will have N dimensions, which is sometimes impossible to compare. I hope that you get the picture.

The textbook entitled Political Philosophy by Steven Smith (Smith 2012) may be used to draw a Hegel Path. The chapters of this book are arranged in chronological order and they are milestones of progress in
political philosophy since ancient Greece. One may say that it is the Hegel Path of the West. China may not necessarily follow this path. However, let us assume that this Hegel Path may be used to guide China’s political evolution (later we will find that this assumption is questionable). Ancient China has less freedom than ancient Greece, thus is near the leftmost point of a Hegel Path. A Marxist regime, being totalitarian, has even less freedom than ancient China, thus also near the leftmost point of a Hegel Path.

2.3. Aristotle’s barrier

A state usually has an existing political order. Suppose a better political order has now been discovered. Should it be adopted? Aristotle admonishes caution. (Aristotle and Jowett 2001, 58) “Any change of government which has to be introduced should be one which men, starting from their existing constitutions, will be both willing and able to adopt (emphasis added), since there is quite as much trouble in the reformation of an old constitution as in the establishment of a new one, just as to unlearn is as hard as to learn.” Here willing and able imply some barrier (of change). For convenience I will refer to this Aristotle’s barrier. Aristotle argues that advantages of the new political order as well as the costs of transition should be weighted by all citizens. The new order is adopted only after certain consensus is reached. If costs of change are too high, for example too much suffering, damage, or social unrest, the change should be abandoned or delayed.

2.4. Various political orders

A survey on political orders throughout history and major civilizations is found in (Fukuyama 2011; 2014). Most political orders are naturally formed, such as hereditary dynasties. Democracy is not naturally formed but invented by Athenians. Democracy has many advantages. The following is attributed to Athen’s statesman Pericles: “Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. Our government does not copy our neighbors’, but is an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty an obstacle, but a man may benefit his country whatever the obscurity of his condition.” One striking characteristic of democracy is equality. In a democracy each citizen has the right to vote, or ‘participate in governance’ as phrased in Aristotle’s Politics. Elections determine leaders and policies. Democracy also has significant risks. This is known to Socrates, Plato and others (for a review see Grayling 2017; Miller 2018).

A state has many political groups (some use the term classes). Aristotle argues that the best political order depends on the nature of these groups and their relative strength, resulting in one among several democracies and oligarchies which are Aristotle’s goals (refer to Book IV of Politics). Earlier I used the term suboptimal, meaning that a political order is not optimal but the Aristotle barrier prevents a change. Furthermore, Plato’s Republic considers a ruling class formed differently from Politics. In the Republic, potential candidates for rulers are separated from birth and undergo extensive education and training. All political orders considered by Aristotle and Plato assume no explicit role of religion, i.e., they are secular. Religion may complicate a political order (section 4).

Rule of Law

The meaning of Rule of Law is that law is supreme and limits the ruler (Fukuyama 2011, 245-253). Rule of Law is different from rule by law. It is widely acknowledged that a good political community must be under Rule of Law. Rule of Law is universally praised by leaders around the world, ranging from the US, China, Iran, Russia (Tamanaha 2004, 1-10). In some textbooks (e.g., Heywood 2007), Rule of Law is a prerequisite of liberal democracy. If a democracy is not under Rule of Law, political power is easily abused and anarchy or tyranny of the majority are likely to develop. It is known that Rule of Law is difficult to realize (e.g. Fukuyama 2011).
As far as Rule of Law is concerned, China lags way behind. One may even argue that the Rule of Law has not even started in China. Fukuyama wrote “China represents the one world civilization that never developed a true rule of law. In ancient Israel, the Christian West, the Muslim world, and India, law originated in a transcendental religion and was interpreted and implemented by a hierarchy of religious scholars and jurists. The keepers of the law in each case were a social group separate from the political authorities — Jewish judges, Hindu Brahmins, Catholic priests and bishops, the Muslim ulama. The degree to which the law limited the arbitrary power of rulers depended on the institutional separation of legal-religious hierarchy from the political one, as well as the degree to which one or the other group was united or divided. . . . .

“In China, by contrast, there was never a transcendental religion, and there was never a pretense that law had a divine origin. Law was seen as a rational human instrument by which the state exercised its authority and maintained public order. This meant that, as in Japan, China had rule by law rather than rule of law. . . . . Rights were rather the gift of a benevolent ruler. “ (Fukuyama 2014, 357-358) No Rule of Law is a big obstacle to developing democracy in China.

History of law in Islamic world is surveyed in (Ruthven 2006, 122-173). The Rule of Law has never been truly established in Islamic world. Although theoretically the law supposed to limit the ruler’s power and to confer the ruler’s legitimacy, “[in] practice Muslim rulers proved unwilling to submit themselves to the Shari’a when it affected their personal interests, and Muslim qadis [Islamic judge] were powerless to enforce judgements against high or powerful state officials.” (Ruthven 2006, 171) No Rule of Law is also a major obstacle to developing democracy in Muslim nations.

Political Ideals of Religions

Prominent Middle East historian Bernard Lewis observed “The older religions of mankind were all related to — were in a sense a part of — authority, whether of the tribe, the city, or the king. The cult provided a visible symbol of group identity and loyalty; the faith provided sanction for the ruler and his laws.” (Lewis 2002, 96) Religion had a strong influence in early societies. Today’s nation-states inherited political orders and institutions from early societies. Therefore, it is important to know the political ideals of Islam, Christianity, and Confucianism.

Although Judaism, Christianity and Islam have the same root, the political ideals of these monotheistic religions are very different. Bernard Lewis wrote “The first and in many ways the most profound difference, from which all the others follow, can be seen in the contrasting foundation myths — I use this expression without intending any disrespect — of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The children of Israel fled from bondage, and wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before they were permitted to enter the Promised Land. Their leader Moses had only a glimpse, and was not himself permitted to enter. Jesus was humiliated and crucified, and his followers suffered persecution and martyrdom for centuries, before they were finally able to win over the ruler, and to adapt the state, its language, and its institutions to their purpose. Muhammad achieved victory and triumph in his own lifetime. He conquered his promised land, and created his own state, of which he himself was supreme sovereign. As such, he promulgated laws, dispensed justice, levied taxes, and the story of his decisions and actions as ruler is sanctified in Muslim scripture and amplified in Muslim tradition.” (Lewis 2002, 100-101) They define the political ideals.

4.1. Political Ideal of Islam

Muhammad established a political entity and enacted laws. For Muslims, the Quran came from God directly and the Hadith is a collection of words and actions of Muhammad. The Quran and the Hadith are considered sacred among Muslims. Muhammad’s successors were known as caliphs, literally deputes of the faithful. Who is qualified to be the caliph of all Muslims? This is in dispute and its outcome defines two major sects of Islam: Sunnis and Shiites. Generally speaking, ordinary Muslims have no say in determining caliphs. The political ideal of Islam is clearly defined.
Obviously, the political ideal of Islam is incompatible with democracy. In a democracy, people choose leaders. Another obstacle to liberal democracy is that Rule of Law has never been established in the Islamic world (section 3).

4.2. Judaism and Christianity

Judaism, described in the Old Testament, is the religion of ancient Israel. The political ideal of Judaism is a theocracy. This political ideal is of little relevance now, even modern Israel is a liberal democracy. The meaning of the Old Testament is not political but theological.

Christianity does not have a political ideal. Jesus did not build a political entity. When he was challenged by Pilate, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” (John 18:36) This allows Christians to pursue any good political order. Eventually it leads to secularism and liberal democracy. Fukuyama’s End of History thesis could be seen as valid in this sense.

Furthermore, Christianity is a ‘natural ally’ of democracy (Ball and Dagger 2010, 29) “for it proclaims that every person, regardless of gender, nationality, or status, is a child of God. By the standards of the ancient world, certainly, Christianity stood for radical equality. Rich or poor, slave or free, citizen or alien, Greek, Jew, or Roman, woman or man, …….. because all are equal in the eyes of God.” In real history, Christians went through tortuous centuries before finding liberal democracy. Along the path were struggles of theology, political philosophy, real world politics, and even sectarian wars. Some issues between religion and politics still remain today, often discussed under the topic of separation of church and state (e.g. Witte Jr. 2006; Hamburger 2004; Kramnick and Moore 2005).

4.3 Confucianism and Marxism

Many consider Confucianism a religion, though some disagree. Ninian Smart considers a religion in seven dimensions (Smart 2009). Fowler & Fowler note that Confucianism has four dimensions out of the seven: Ritual, Ethical, Social, Material, and in their opinion Confucianism is a religion (Fowler and Fowler, 2008, 69-75). In any event, the role Confucianism played in premodern Chinese politics is similar to religions in other ancient civilizations. Thus, I will regard Confucianism as the religion of ancient China. Marxism may also be regarded as a religion (Smart 2009).

For two thousand years Confucianism dominated Chinese politics. Confucianism claims there is a political order installed by Heaven. Sitting at the top is the Son of Heaven who has the mandate to rule the whole world. Below him is a hierarchical political order. Prominent historian William McNeill noted that Communist China acted much like past Chinese dynasties in dealing with its dependencies (McNeill 1992, 781). He then continued “Moreover, the Communist hierarchies of party and government came close to duplicating the former Confucian hierarchies of scholars and officials, even to the manner in which they interpenetrated one another in the practical exercise of power. Indeed, totalitarian state socialism, as manifested in European countries since 1917 under both Marxian and Nazi banners, exhibited remarkable affinities with transitional Chinese bureaucratic practices, principles, and prejudices. The practice of entrusting broad discretionary powers to an educated and specially selected elite, the principle of using state power for the benefit of the people at large and justifying even severe oppression thereby, together with prejudice against such assorted evils as profiteers, foreigners, and the superstitions of religion, were common to good Confucians, pious Communists, and dedicated Nazis.” Pay attention to the three evils: profiteers, foreigners, and the superstitions of religion. Deng and the Party elites started economic reform, removing the first one. In fact the political elites profit themselves because ‘getting rich is glorious’. The other two are still there, though not always overt. They will reappear later.

Let us summarize what we have learned so far. Section 2 considered several secular political orders from Aristotle and Plato, as well as basics of Hegel philosophy. Section 4 examined the impact of religions on
political orders. The combination of secularism, i.e. devoid or removing religious political ideals, and Rule of Law led to liberal democracy in the West.

Change of Political Order

Now we are ready to study the change of political order. Democratization, a related but narrower topic, is surveyed in (Fukuyama 2014, 399-451). Change of political order is more general because of the variety of Aristotle’s goals and existence of Aristotle’s barriers. In addition, religion may complicate things further. Another problem of earlier studies is too western-centric, assuming that other civilizations will follow the same path as the West in political evolution. Some scholars such as Samuel Huntington think that democracy is part of western civilization. This may imply that democracy and westernization should go hand in hand. Though often true, it is not necessarily so (section 2). Confusion on this occurred in the Middle East. For more details refer to What Went Wrong? (Lewis 2002) Some scholars think that religious should have no role in political order. However, this is not always true in the real world.

Before the rise of the West, every major civilization was proud of its achievement and had a well defined political order. Below is extracted from (Lewis 2002, 3-17) for the Islamic world. For many centuries the world of Islam was in the forefront of human civilization and achievement. For Middle East Muslims, the remote lands of Europe were an outer darkness of barbarism from which there was nothing to learn and little to be imported. (China Emperors had similar views.) The Renaissance, the Reformation, the technological revolution passed virtually unnoticed in the lands of Islam. Only after military defeat in the late 17th century the Islamic world began to realize that it lagged behind Europe. The Islamic world then tried to catch up with Europe. The responses of the world of Islam to the West were recounted in an excellent book by Bernard Lewis What Went Wrong? Various aspects were tried in turn: military, wealth, culture, modernity, civil society and so on. Even parliamentary democracies had been tried in the last days of the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt (Lewis 2002, 60). Although the Middle East was the first region to face the West expansion, it lags further behind the West and even some newcomers, such as East Asia (Lewis 2003, 113-119).

For two thousand years China considered herself the center of the world and all other nations should pay respect to her. She had a successful political order defined by Confucianism. Things began to change when western expansion reached China around 1850, some one hundred fifty years later than the Middle East. After several defeats, China realized that she lagged behind the West. China elites started asking what went wrong (the same question asked by Middle East Muslims)? Some Chinese scholars, known as Neo-Confucianism, blamed China’s political weakness on corrupted interpretation of Confucianism (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 224-225). There was a similar line of thinking in the Middle East, which is antecedent to so-called Islamic fundamentalism. By 1912, however, Neo-Confucianism was largely abandoned and Chinese thinkers searched for whatever ideas that worked — refer to (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 264-269) for more details. Later various ideologies coalesced into two major ones in China: Nationalists and Communists. After WWII, Communists fought and won a civil war against Nationalists and established P.R. China in 1949.

Undoubtedly, democracy is attractive, recall the words of Pericles. To catch up with the West, both the Islamic world and China must have considered democracy. However, democracy contradicts the political ideals of both. There are two possible approaches to overcome this contradiction and advance democracy. One may study political philosophy and theology in order to find Aristotle’s goals with some democratic features. The other abandons religion/ideology and adopts secularism and liberal democracy, i.e., the wholesale approach. Nations of Confucianism heritage include P.R. China, Republic of China (Taiwan), and Republic of Korea. All of them have abandoned Confucianism as the state religion/ideology, though some people still adhere to Confucian teachings. The Republic of China and the Republic of Korea became democracies.

P.R. China has gone a different path because of Marxism. Marxism is also incompatible with liberal democracy. Prior to the civil war, Mao and his inner circle enchanted the US by promising multiparty democracy. However, Mao’s words were only a pretense and he never gave true democracy any chance. Immediately after winning the civil war and the power, Mao tore up the agreement with democratic parties, even though many
were just patsies. Although a constitution was passed later, it was stated clearly that the constitution was under leadership of the China Communist Party (CCP), giving the Party the rights to override practically anything. Therefore, the Rule of Law went out the window. Mao’s era underwent many years of summary executions, death of starvation in the tens of millions, persecution of innocents in the hundreds of millions. After the death of Mao, ordinary people in China as well as many Party elites yearned for change. After gaining power, Deng Xiaoping started reform. Deng’s reforms were largely economics but included some political reforms as well. Economic reforms have made China a great power in the world, second only to the US. However, the nature of CCP has not changed. Now it is the West’s turn to ask what went wrong. Many in the west assume that economic growth will lead to political participation which eventually leads to democracy. As said earlier, this line of thinking is western-centric and not sound in political philosophy.

China is far from liberal democracy. China has not made any progress in freedom under CCP. In fact, one can make a case that China has gone backward in freedom. Indeed, in dynastic China Emperors adopted the laissez-faire style ruling to a large extent and peasants and traders enjoyed limited freedom. On the other hand, Communist rule is totalitarian. Ordinary people in P.R. China today has even less freedom than dynastic China. For example, in P.R. China the HuKou system controls families and their movement at an unprecedented level. Thus, on the Hegel Path dynastic China is at the left of ancient Greece and P.R. China is further left still. It took the West 2500 years to move from the leftmost to the rightmost along the Hegel Path. It will be a monumental task to transform China to a liberal democracy in one step.

The above consideration of Hegel Path is at the high level. To see a slightly lower level, consider institutions and people in turn. Democracy is not a naturally formed political order but deliberately constructed. For a democracy to succeed, new institutions have to be constructed, improved, and maintained. One of them is Rule of Law in section 3. Other institutions include free elections, freedom of speech, separation of powers, free press and so on. Recall McNeill’s penetrating observation that Communist institutions resemble Confucianism ones. To Chinese Marxism institutions were more familiar or easier to adapt than liberal democracy. In addition, many Chinese were told that Marxism leads to a more advanced political order. Clearly, China needs a huge amount of work to build democratic institutions from scratch.

Even harder to change than institutions is people’s minds. Aristotle’s barrier means that people at least are willing and able to adopt the new political order. Changing obedient people to participating citizens is very difficult. John Adams once remarked to Thomas Jefferson that (in comparison with American Revolution for Independence) the real revolution “was in the minds of the people,” (Miller 2018, 97) John Adams was commenting on the nation building after American Revolution. At that time Americans inherited centuries of British rights tradition, some experience of political participation, and British legal heritage. Even with these John Adams still expected a great challenge to change the minds of people for the new republic. Also note that John Adams meant republic not democracy. (American transformed to a democracy a few generations later but not in Adam’s time.) Many philosophers are aware of the challenge. Leo Strauss’s well known book on Plato’s Republic is entitled The City and man . One key of Rousseau philosophy is to change man. Francis Fukuyama named his book The End of History and the Last Man . At present many ordinary people in China prefer the status quote, i.e. under Communist rule, than democracy. There are several reasons for this. One reason is due to CCP’s successful propaganda. Another reason is that fast economic growth makes many ordinary people accept CCP’s rule. In addition, those who have not experienced freedom often do not value freedom highly.

If most Chinese still believe Marxism, then there is no hope for democracy. Fortunately, most Chinese no longer believe Marxism. Some pay lip service to Marxism because it helps them to land good jobs or to get promoted. Even many political elites do not believe in Marxism but use it as a tool to gain power, promotion, status, money, etc. On the other hand, the communist party controls education, press, media while ordinary people have little freedom. Marxism cannot justify legitimacy of political power, at least not in the long run. Once giving up Marxism, I do not see China going back to Confucianism or Islam. China most likely will adopt secularism, which should eventually lead to liberal democracy. However, this is unlikely to happen in one step and may take centuries.
Taiwan (Republic of China) also encountered many inherited obstacles just like China. How did it become a liberal democracy? First, Taiwan long had a constitution that guaranteed democracy. Although China had a nominal constitution, it was never meant to be applied. Anyone who tries to argue for rights promised by the constitution will be put into prison. Second, Taiwan had Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jie-shi) and Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jing-guo) as leaders. According to a research on Chiang Kai-shek’s journal, Chiang was strongly influenced by both Marxism and the Bible (Yang 2019). When Chiang faced the choice between Marxism and Jesus, he chose Jesus. The reason? He said that Marxism teaches hate while Jesus teaches love, thus I choose Jesus. Had Chiang chosen Marxism, history would be completely different. I was surprised to learn this because while in China I had seen overwhelming literature on Chiang’s bad character and corruption, which in retrospect might be lies or distorted propaganda. Later, his son Chiang Ching-kuo legalized political parties and free press. Both Chiang’s played important roles in Taiwan’s democratization. Visionary leaders including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Mohandas Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela often play pivotal roles in democratic transition.

Thus, statesmen may decide the outcome. A big problem for China is that most Communist elites firmly oppose freedom and democracy. They regard the political power as their proprietary property. Although the name People’s Republic contains republics and Chinese government occasionally uses the term democracy in documents or speeches, ordinary people have no part in governance. No general election has ever been held and no policy is debated before it is announced. It is a typical Marxist regime. If Communist Party’s monopoly of power is threatened, almost all Party elites are hardliners. As a case in point, at the height of the 1989 Tiananmen Protest it is reported that Deng Xiaoping said we gained power after great sacrifice of life. If you want to take over, sacrifice 200,000 lives first. Even a reformer like Deng had no hesitation to resort to violence to keep the power. It is unlikely that many Chinese are willing to sacrifice their lives. Even suppose such sacrifice does occur, the Party elites still will not give up their stranglehold of power. Instead, they will resort to force to put down dissent and claim that they act for the good of the nation.

As for Xi Jinping, first it is not only him but a clique behind him that holds power. As far as political power is concerned, they are all hardliners. A well known quote from Xi Jinping strongly criticized Mikhail Gorbachev. He blamed Gorbachev for the collapse of the Soviet Union, criticizing that he was not manly (strong) enough to stand for the nation. Xi thinks that he has a chip on his shoulder. If CCP loses power, it would be his fault. I am pretty sure that if one million Chinese demonstrate for democracy Xi will not hesitate to use force “for the good of the country”.

For a democratic transition to success, endogenous drives are strongly preferred than exogenous drives. This may be understood in terms of Aristotle’s barrier. In addition, one needs to understand the national psychology of a proud civilization, such as China. Suppose you want to promote liberal democracy in China. Many Chinese will say that we have five thousand years of civilization while you Americans have only a little more than two hundred years of history, why should you force your political system on us?

It took Western nations many centuries to develop liberal democracy. China needs not to follow the same path. However, the above discussion should make it clear that it is difficult to democratize China in one step. An intermediate stage or two is more practical for China’s political evolution. What would be a good intermediate stage? Thomas Hobbes’ philosophy might be considered for the intermediate stage. Hobbes philosophy has a covenant/social contract which limits the government. Dynastic China (Confucianism) and Marxism have no clearly defined social contract. China actually had vague social contract theory (McNeill 1992, 226). The Emperor needs to perform ritual correctly and conduct morally. Separately, there is a well known Chinese saying ‘Water can carry boats, but they can also overturn boats’. However, these are vague. If China can adopt the Rule of Law and a written social contract, it will be a great step forward in political evolution. Democracy and other liberal reforms may be considered later.
Rethink the US-China Relationship

As China becomes a superpower, the world order needs to be revisited to see if it needs to be updated or completely rewritten. The US-China relationship is the most important bilateral relation in the world, thus it is essential to the world order. This section will consider first the world order then the US-China relationship.

A good overview of the world order is given in Henry Kissenger’s *World Order*, which is concise but insightful (Kissenger 2015, 1-10). The current world order is not some well thought off design but a compromise of historical events. It originated from the Westphalia Treaty in Europe in 1648. The Westphalia peace reflected a practical accommodation to reality. The principle of its arrangement then gradually expanded to other continents.

The American version of world order is traced to Puritan settlers who migrated to the New World to build what Governor John Winthrop called a “city upon a hill” in 1630. This ‘city upon a hill’ has its roots in Augustine and the New Testament. ‘In the American view of world order, peace and balance would occur naturally, and ancient enmities would be set aside’ if other nations were given the chance. However, the previous section shows that this assumption is overly optimistic, especially the word naturally. Kissinger also noted a contradiction of American’s view on world order, “The United States has alternated between defending the Westphalian System and castigating its premises of balance of power and noninterference in domestic affairs as immoral and outmoded, and sometimes both at once.”

After WWII, American version of world order became American consensus, which Kissinger noted, ‘an inexorably expanding cooperative order of states observing common rules and norms, embracing liberal economic systems, forswearing territorial conquest, respecting national sovereignty, and adopting participatory and democratic systems of governance.’ This vision had been largely successful for several decades. This world order was also influenced by German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 2007). The problem is that Kant’s vision assumes that all nations are republican. However, China and many others are not. The previous section shows that China will not likely be a republic or democracy for generations. China will not adopt ‘participatory and democratic systems of governance’ anytime soon. A more realistic world order is needed.

Kissinger’s *World Order* begins with an example of American’s foreign policy. In 1961 Kissinger asked President Harry S Truman what he was most proud of his achievements. Truman said ‘That we totally defeated our enemies and then brought them back to the community of nations. I would like to think that only America would have done this.’ Kissenger noted that all Truman’s successors followed some version of this narrative. True, America defeated Germany and Japan in WWII then successfully transformed them to liberal democracy. The earlier US policy toward China was also somewhat similar in its goal. However, it is very difficult if not impossible to force China into a liberal democracy. China is too big; no nation has such great power and resources to force such a transition. Furthermore, Germany and Japan after WWII were much further ahead of China in terms of freedom, further right on the Hegel Path than today’s China. Therefore, either one was easier to democratize than today’s China. Chinese have no experiences of freedom. Communist propaganda has a monopoly on news media. Recent fast economic growth and rapid improvement of life in China also make many ordinary Chinese believe that democracy is not good for China and CCP is needed for stability and economic growth. Incidentally, for different reasons it is also difficult to transform Iraq or Afghanistan to democracy.

As aside, Carl Minzner’s frustration with law reforms in China should be understandable now. Minzner worked with legal reform of China for a long time. He wrote “America has a serious genetic disorder when it comes to understanding societies undergoing political transitions.” (Minzner 2018, XViii). His book goes on to explain the current American approach to spread democracy to China is not working.

What is China’s vision for the world? Dynastic China’s vision has been briefly mentioned before. CCP’s vision has not changed much from dynastic China’s vision. Like ancient China, Marxism does not acknowledge any sovereignty except its own. As McNeill pointed out, after CCP came to power it thought and acted just like...
dynastic China before it (McNeill 1992, 781). It is essential for China to change its vision, otherwise there will never be peace nor stability in Asia and the world. On the other hand, China is much more pragmatic than, say, in the 1960s. It should be recognized that the current world order, especially the American version, is also impractical. Will China agree to ‘adopting participatory and democratic systems of governance’? China becomes too powerful for the current world order. If you read Kissinger’s book carefully, he also realized that the current world order is unlikely to continue unchanged.

China and the US have two fundamentally different world visions, contradictory in many places. I think that the key is to find a compromise of these visions that is understandable to both sides, and at the same time pragmatic and forward looking. Forward looking means advancing freedom if possible. The topic of a new world order is too complex to go into details in this article. Here is some preliminary consideration. Suppose that China is aiming for a state with a written social contract discussed in the last section. After China recognizes and acknowledges limited sovereignties, it is important to understand the possibility of the Hobbean world, that is, potentially everyone at war with everyone. Thus, it is important to establish some mechanism for stability and peace in the world. Its foundational philosophy should not be based on Immanuel Kant’s perpetual peace since it is impractical. Thomas Hobbes argued for a Leviathan within a nation-state. No such a Leviathan, i.e. all powerful world government, is possible at this time. Instead, a stable, peaceful international order should start with the US and China as two pillars and Europe, Japan, and Russia as supplementary powers. The world order may build on the top of it. This is only a sketch and it will depend on the choice of the previous section, i.e. the future of China’s political order.

Conclusion

In this article, I consider the political philosophy for the change of political order in China, the US-China relationship, and the world order. Aristotle and Plato have studied political orders and change of political orders. Hegel has studied the history of political evolution, freedom of ordinary people is the key to evolution of political orders. Using these I study the change of political order of China. I think that previous studies on political evolution or democratization is too western-centric and failed to take into account religions, culture, and other factors. After considering various factors, I argue that a multi-stages transition to democracy is more suitable to today’s China.

This would affect the US-China policy and the world order. An intermediate stage of China may help both China and the US to adjust their visions of the world, to reduce tensions and frictions, and to pursue peace and stability of the whole world.

References:


Frederick Beiser, Hegel, Routledge, 2005.


John Witte, Jr. *Facts and Fictions About the History of Separation of Church and State*.

*Journal of Church and State*, Volume 48, Issue 1, 1 January 2006, Pages 15–45.

Yang, Tian-shi, 杨天石: Jie Mi Jiang Jie Shi Ri Ji (Decode Chiang Kai-shek’s Journal), 2019.