Issues & Studies 34, no. 8 (August 1998): 63-101.

Democratic Transition: A Comparative Study of China and the Former Soviet Union*

SUJIAN GUO

The central question in this article is why the democratic transition that occurred in the former Soviet Union failed to occur in post-Mao China, a question that has rarely been fully studied in a comparative and systematic way. The first half of the article seeks to solve the methodological problem in comparative research that has limited the ability of social scientists to identify a set of causal variables that shaped contrasting outcomes in the political transition of China and the Soviet Union. In analyzing regime transitions involving small-n cases, this article adopts the most similar systems design to minimize the problem of causal overdetermination. In so doing, a comprehensive and multi-causal analytical framework of variables is developed and used to formulate a set of hypotheses and explore the causal connections between the key forces and the transition outcome.

The second half of the article seeks to provide a systematic, comprehensive, and multi-causal comparison of China and the Soviet Union to capture the whole of the reality of political transition. In contrast to prior studies that have been too narrow to answer the research question, the analysis of the six hypothesized relationships in this article offers an adequate causal explanation for the variation in transition outcome and also

Sujian Guo is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. His areas of specialization are comparative politics, internaitonal relations, and political methodology.

*Revised version of a paper delivered at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, The Sheraton Washington Hotel, Washington, D.C., August 28-31, 1997. The author thanks Jeffray Berejikian, Kenneth Farmer, Marilyn Hardwig, David Houston, Andrew Nathan, Robert L. Peterson, Yang Zhong, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

C.E.P.S.

makes it possible to predict regime change in post-Deng China.

Keywords: democratic transition; post-Mao China; the Soviet Union; regime change; communist and post-communist studies

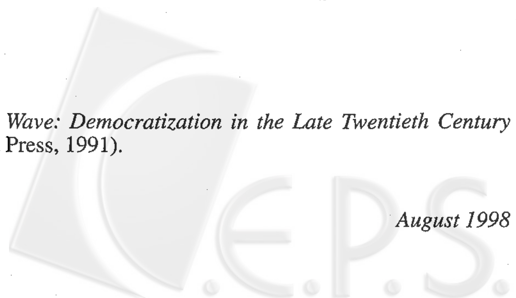
* * *

The past two decades have witnessed a most remarkable development from authoritarianism toward democracy, which has been referred to as "the Third Wave" of democratization.[1] In the past ten years, the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have undergone simultaneous political, economic, and social transformations. Formerly communist countries are in the process of creating and consolidating new political, economic, and social systems and institutions. However, the last major communist bulwark, China, has not evolved toward democracy, thus showing a different development pattern. This raises important questions: Why has the democratic transition that occurred in the former communist countries in the Soviet bloc failed to occur in China? What factors that contributed to the transition in the former were absent in the latter? In particular, why did the two largest communist countries, China and the Soviet Union, which had so much in common, show such different transition outcomes in the late 1980s and the early 1990s? These questions are important in the study of the regime change in post-Mao China and post-Deng China, both because explaining or predicting regime change is based on the understanding of past and current patterns of development, and also because the question itself raises some controversial methodological issues in the comparative study of democratic transition.

Chinese and Soviet area studies have not provided an analytical framework elaborate enough to fully answer this question, one in which the potential causal variables can be identified and integrated in a logic of explanation and serve as the basis for a comprehensive comparative study of Chinese and Soviet regime transitions. One recent comparative study of

---

[1]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).



the Soviet and Chinese regime transition has attempted to integrate multiple factors into an analytical framework to explain regime changes.[2] The point of departure of this study is convergence rather than divergence. The argument is that a capitalist or democratic "societal takeover" has occurred in both countries, with no significant variations in the dependent variable. Therefore, the study focuses on the "similarities" that are considered to allow the two countries to "experience analogous process dynamics during regime transition" and generate similar "societal takeover" outcomes.

In contrast to the above work, however, the point of departure of this article is divergence rather than convergence. The regime transition in the two countries has yielded different outcomes: the former Soviet Union has made a relatively successful democratic transition which has given rise to democratic consolidation, whereas post-Mao China has not been able or willing to do so. Therefore, focusing on the similarities between the two similar systems will not explain the variations in transition outcome. Explaining the different transition patterns requires contrasting the differences rather than comparing the similarities.

Transition theories, as theoretical models, have been influenced by theoretical frameworks drawn from the social science disciplines such as system theory, political culture theory, decision theory, modernization theory, structural functionalism, or institutionalism. While most of these approaches enable us to formulate hypotheses and compare regime transitions across nations and regions in a systematic and rigorous way, they tend to be one-dimensional, exploring a single-level variable in rich detail by focusing on social structural conditions, elite strategic choices, political-economic interactions, civil-military relations, or civil society in transitional politics. These single-cause explanations do not provide an adequate causal explanation for the question of why the democratic transition that occurred in the Soviet Union failed to occur in post-Mao China.[3] Demo-

[2]Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[3]As Gabriel A. Almond and Laura Roselle suggest, in their overview of the literature in communism studies in the last several decades, no single theoretical model under examination captures the whole of the political reality, and "the multi-model theoretical approach gives us a more secure understanding of political patterns and potentialities." See Gabriel A.

cratic transitions are complex phenomena, and are usually caused by a joint effect of many causal forces, rather than one or two factors operating at any single level of the political systems under investigation. A comprehensive framework, which integrates various models in some combination as a way of explaining and predicting regime transition, will allow us to locate the key causal variables affecting the transition outcome, provide a multidimensional approach to the question, and develop a better understanding and a fuller explanation of the success or failure of democratic transition in these two countries.

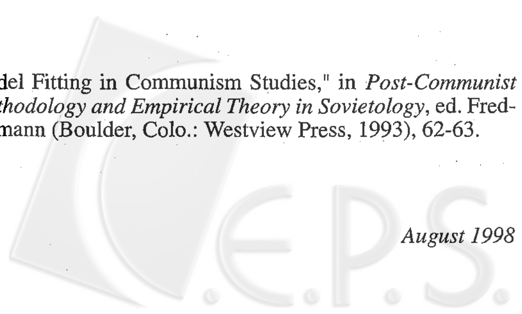
The challenge, however, is to uncover how the key causal variables can be identified, how various theoretical models can "fit together in a logic of explanation," and what is the logic in which they fit.[4] To this end, this paper will do the following: (1) define the key concepts in order to put the comparison on a common base and demonstrate the different nature and outcomes of the regime change in the two countries; (2) identify major theoretical approaches on democratic transition, evaluate their usefulness in answering the research question, integrate them into a research strategy and design by which the key causal variables can be identified and fit together in a logic of explanation, and use this analytical framework to formulate a set of hypotheses about the association between the causal variables and the success or failure of democratic transition; and (3) examine how the key causal variables made a successful transition to democracy more likely in the former Soviet Union but less likely in China.

Defining the Key Concepts

Before the research question can be addressed, definitions of democracy, democratic transition, and other related key terms must be established, allowing us to put our discussion on a common base and avoid "con-

Almond and Laura Roselle, "Model Fitting in Communism Studies," in *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science: Methodology and Empirical Theory in Sovietology*, ed. Frederic J. Fleron, Jr. and Erik P. Hoffmann (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 62-63.

[4]Ibid., 62.



ceptual stretching."[5] This article adopts the middle ground for defining democracy:[6] a set of procedures and institutions that allow the contestation over power in free and fair elections, assure accountability of the ruler to the ruled, assure checks and balances in the exercise of government, ensure the neutrality of the armed forces, and guarantee civil and political liberty and rights of every citizen.[7] These five empirical dimensions will allow us to measure the extent to which political systems are democratic and to compare systems to judge whether a democratic transition has occurred or whether a political system has become more or less democratic.

In defining democratic transition, "a transfer of power" is usually identified as the key element, which consists of two distinctive phases: a process of dissolution of the authoritarian regime and a process of emergence of democratic institutions.[8] Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman argue that democratic transitions can be considered to have occurred

---

[5]The "conceptual stretching" is referred to as the distortion that occurs when a concept does not fit the new cases in comparative studies or "where the same terms have been used, often without having been explicitly defined, to mean different things." See Gerardo L. Munck, "Democratic Transitions in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 3 (April 1994): 356. See also Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (December 1970): 1033-53; Giovanni Sartori, "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," in *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*, ed. Giovanni Sartori (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1984), 35-40, 44-46.

[6]The Schumpeterian definition is a less restricted definition of the ideal type, with minimal conceptual breadth, referred to as "electoralism." However, some scholars tend to stress conceptual breadth, which involves a larger number of defining properties intrinsic to democracy, while others choose a middle ground for defining democracy to avoid either an overly narrow or overly broad definition, with the concept being defined with reference to a number of characteristics that distinguish it from other political systems. For a detailed discussion, see Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (October 1990): 2, 17; Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), chap. 15; Scott Mainwaring, "Transition to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical and Comparative Issues," in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation*, ed. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 295.

[7]This conception of democracy is modified on the basis of Karl's definition. See Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," 2.

[8]Juan Linz, "Transitions to Democracy," *The Washington Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 148; Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), part 3:56; Helga A. Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (July 1994): 380; Pietro Grilli di Cortona, "From Communism to Democracy: Rethinking Regime Change in Hungary and Czechoslovakia," *International Social Science Journal* 43, no. 2 (1991): 316.

E.P.S.

when authoritarian governments are forced to yield power to ones that operate within the set of conditions mentioned above.[9]

In defining democratic transition, however, it is essential to make an analytic distinction between liberalization and democratization. *Liberalization* is a controlled partial opening of the political space on political and civil rights from above, such as releasing political prisoners, opening up some issues for public debate, loosening censorship, freedom of press, speech, association, and the like, but short of choosing a government through freely competitive elections. *Democratization* is extrication from the nondemocratic regime and constitution, which is a process that subjects different groups to competition, regularizes transfer of power, and institutionalizes the pluralist political structures and the procedures by which different groups compete to win or withdraw from the power.[10] Liberalization may precede democratization and become a feature of transition,[11] but "liberalization does not involve a process essential to the transition to democracy, namely a transfer of power, the abdication of power, or the takeover of power by some groups willing to open the doors to democratic political processes, or ready to turn over power to those who would do so."[12] Equally important, we must not confuse political liberalization with *economic liberalization* in the comparative study of regime changes in China and other communist countries:

> Economic liberalization refers to a process of movement toward a market economy and all the efforts designed to bring the economy to be competitive and market-oriented, to reduce the level of government intervention in economic activity, to allow the market to set prices and direct material and manpower resources to move freely through market distribution channels, to allow the private sector to have more economic freedom, and to merge the economy closely with the world economy.[13]

[9]Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 13.

[10]Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," 381; Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 9.

[11]Cortona, "From Communism to Democracy," 316.

[12]Linz, "Transitions to Democracy," 148.

[13]Sujian Guo, "Totalitarianism: An Outdated Paradigm for Post-Mao China?" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 72.

C.E.P.S.

Neither political liberalization nor economic liberalization will always lead to democratization.

In this article, *democratic transition*, which by definition equals democratization, is defined as a political process of movement aimed at establishing a democratic political system, initiated either from above or below or a combination of both, committed to democracy, tolerating opposition, allowing bargaining and compromise for the resolution of social conflicts, and engaging in the fundamental transformation of political structure. We can argue that, by definition, the collapse of the communist regime has brought Russia into the phase of democratic consolidation, while the Chinese communist regime has not begun democratic transition, but rather has over the past years focused on economic liberalization and "rationalization."[14] Although present-day China enjoys more individual freedom or autonomy than under Mao's regime, a relaxation of communist ideology, and a freer market, a transition to a democratic pluralist political system is clearly not on the present political agenda.

Research Strategy and Design

Different theoretical approaches to transition theory have provided various analytical frameworks for a comparative study of regime transition across regions, and identified factors to explain outcomes of particular transformations. However, "theoretical approaches to democratic transition have not represented any coherent or even elaborate body of work."[15] Transition theory has in fact tended to "diverge" between different schools of thought. Major studies in the rich literature on democratic transition can be categorized into four theoretical approaches: structure-oriented,[16]

---

[14]Ibid., 70-88.

[15]Geoffrey Pridham and Tatu Vanhanen, eds., *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

[16]Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69-105; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern*

E.P.S.

process-oriented,[17] institutional context-oriented,[18] and political economy-oriented approaches.[19] Most scholars have focused their research on only one of these dimensions. The choice of focus often reflects individual scholars' judgment of which level of analysis is likely to be most fruitful and can contribute to a good understanding of the patterns and outcomes of regime transition.

It seems unlikely, however, that any single-level variable can be considered the most important and afford an adequate understanding of the complexity of transition process and its outcome. For instance, social and structural conditions may have a long-term constraining effect on democ-

---

World (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens provide a comprehensive review of the modernization literature on democratization. See their *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12-39.

[17]Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Giuseppe di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Herbert Kitschelt, "Political Regime Change: Structure and Process-Driven Explanations?" *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 4 (December 1992): 1032.

[18]James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 734-49; Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Stephen D. Krasner, "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 21, no. 1 (April 1988): 66-94; Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Patrick H. O'Neil, "Revolution From Within: Institutional Analysis, Transitions from Authoritarianism, and the Case of Hungary," *World Politics* 48, no. 4 (July 1996): 579-603; Ali R. Abootalebi, "Democratization in Developing Countries: 1980-1989," *Journal of Developing Areas* 29 (July 1995): 508; Terry Lynn Karl and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," *International Social Science Journal* 43, no. 2 (1991): 272-74; Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," 6-7; Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," 383.

[19]Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, 4, 7-8; Stephan Haggard and Steven B. Webb, eds., *Voting for Reform: Democracy, Political Liberalization, and Economic Adjustment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Omar G. Encarnación, "The Politics of Dual Transitions," *Comparative Politics* 28, no. 4 (July 1996): 482-83; Nancy Bermeo, "Sacrifice, Sequence, and Strength in Successful Dual Transitions: Lessons from Spain," *Journal of Politics* 56, no. 3 (August 1994): 619-23; Jeffrey Frieden, *Debt, Development, and Democracy: Modern Political Economy and Latin America, 1960-1985* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

ratization and help to explain the dynamics of social change, but they can hardly explain why different political actors make different choices, why their preferences change and policy choices shift from one to another, and why one choice prevails over another, within the same social and structural context. Elite strategic choices and their interactions might be an important variable affecting the transition patterns and outcomes, but elites make their strategic choices in the particular context that confines their preferences and calculations of the costs and benefits of different transition strategies. The analysis of the "confined context," which might be another key variable that determines the parameters of political action, will be conducive to the analysis of why and how the elite choices are made. However, the change in China and the former Soviet Union has suggested that, although the preexisting political and economic structures and institutions are similar, the transition process and outcome are quite different. The problem of why such similar structures and institutions produce such different outcomes will remain unsolved. There must be some other unexplained variables, such as the generational differences of the communist leadership, the role of the military in transitional politics, and the like, affecting the regime changes or confining the parameters of the elite strategic choices.

Therefore, sole focus on any single-level variable in the course of transition will not provide us with a satisfactory explanation for the divergent transition outcomes in the two countries, because a joint effect of multiple causal forces determines the transition variations. Different approaches should be considered complementary in integrating and explaining the observed phenomena. A more comprehensive scheme is thus needed to provide a multidimensional approach to the question "why the democratic transition that occurred in the former USSR failed to occur in China."

The task at hand is to find out an appropriate research strategy and design by which such a synthesis can be made to integrate the key elements of each of the theoretical approaches into a general analytical framework in which the key causal variables can be located and fit together in "the logic of explanation" for the variations in transition outcome.[20]

---

[20]The logic of explanation requires that the relevant, important determinants of the occur-

While the richness of theories has suggested a large number of explanatory variables for the transition, it has also led us to a dilemma called causal or explanatory overdetermination: the "piling up [of] any number of logically unrelated or logically contradictory reasons for an occurrence."[21] Social scientists usually run into the problem of causal overdetermination when two or more alternative explanations are available for the same event or if we fail to eliminate rival explanations.[22] This is a typical problem in comparative studies that *involve small-n cases and large number of variables*.

However, in *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntington "makes no pretense at parsimony and worries little about theoretical overdetermination. His goal is to explain, and he employs any cause or argument useful to full explanation. Overall, the causes of democratization in any country are multiple, with the combination of causes varying across countries, across waves, and within waves."[23] This raises an important methodological controversy over the two research strategies, with one stressing parsimony and generality, and the other emphasizing accuracy and causality or "comprehensiveness."[24] Are they equally legitimate and effective research strate-

---

rence be singled out. Following Carl G. Hempel's characterization of the logic of explanation, an explanation "answers the question, 'why did the explanadum-phenomenon occur?' by showing that the phenomenon resulted from particular circumstances, specified in $C_1, C_2, \ldots C_k$, in accordance with laws $L_1, L_2, \ldots L_k$. By pointing this out, the argument shows that, given the particular circumstances and the laws in question, the occurrence of the phenomenon was to be expected; and it is in this sense that the explanation enables us to understand why the phenomenon occurred." See Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 337.

[21]Jack Snyder, "Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy," in Fleron and Hoffmann, *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science*, 113; Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), viii.

[22]Frederic J. Fleron, Jr., "The Logic of Inquiry in Post-Soviet Studies: Art or Science?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 29, no. 3 (1996): 270.

[23]Ben Ross Schneider, "Democratic Consolidations: Some Broad Comparisons and Sweeping Arguments," *Latin American Research Review* 30, no. 2 (1995): 217; Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 37-38.

[24]Imre Lakatos has noted that a theory is evaluated not only on the basis of parsimony but also on the grounds of the comprehensiveness of the explanation it advances and the extent to which it provides a promising foundation for future research. See Imre Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers I: The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 35.

C.E.P.S.

gies in empirical studies? Which one strategy is more appropriate than the other?

It is the opinion of the author that there is no single "correct" research strategy in researching political and social phenomenon. Each strategy has its own particular emphasis in research practices and hence each strategy possesses some strengths that the other does not. However, the research strategy stressing parsimony and generality is more appropriate if the study involves a large number of cases and if the causal variables are relatively small and can be quantified. The strategy emphasizing causality and accuracy is optimal if the study involves a small number of cases and if the causal variables are relatively large and some of them cannot be quantified. Thus, the latter is most appropriate in our case. The purpose of this article is to explain the variation in democratic transition in the two particular countries, and therefore sacrificing parsimony and generality to maximize accuracy and causality is the optimal strategy.

The "most similar systems design"[25] is a way by which the problem of causal overdetermination can be minimized through maximizing the number of the rival explanatory variables to be eliminated. The logic of the most similar systems design is fairly clear: "Common systemic characteristics are conceived of as 'controlled for,' whereas intersystemic differences are viewed as explanatory variables. The number of common characteristics sought is maximal and the number of not shared characteristics sought, minimal."[26] China and the former Soviet Union are considered the most similar communist systems but they differ with respect to their divergent patterns and outcomes of transition. These two cases thus serve as good

[25]Cf. Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), chap. 2; David Collier, "The Comparative Method," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, ed. Ada W. Finiftre (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1993), 105-13.

[26]Przworski and Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, 33. That is to say, those commonalities are treated as the controlled variables, which are not responsible for the explanation of variation in the dependent variable. Identified as irrelevant variables or "rival explanations," they must be first eliminated from the explanations so that the number of causal variables can be minimized. Those differences are treated as the experimental variables, which are responsible for the explanation of variation, and they are identified as relevant variables or explanatory variables.

examples for comparative analysis, because these two countries share broad commonalities, and therefore the number of the "causal variables," although still relatively large, can be minimized.

The following will identify the six most important commonalities between China and the former Soviet Union prior to Deng's reforms and Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika*: (1) similar historical/cultural heritage, sharing a long imperial background and bureaucratic/authoritarian political and cultural tradition that was profoundly antagonistic to democratization, without significant experience with democratic institutions; (2) similar party-state political apparatus, sharing a long communist/totalitarian political experience and heritage, with highly centralized, monistic, dictatorial, paternalistic leadership and power structure; (3) similar ideological commitment and philosophical absolutism, which served as a means of controlling and mobilizing the population, legitimizing the regimes' political and socioeconomic policies and arrangements, and enhancing group loyalty and social coherence, in the attempt for the regime to rise above and gloss over religion, nationality, and other differences; (4) similar centralized and planned economy, based on the socialist mode of production and distribution, sharing much in common with respect to their ownership of the means of production, economic institutions, decision-making, and allocation of resources, and suffering from common systemic failings and problems; (5) similar transition environmental factors, with their reforms originated from domestic factors, such as inefficacy or illegitimacy of the communist regime and the inability to satisfy the expectations of the controlled population—neither of the two countries had their strategic choices or options subjected to a foreign power so that the outcomes could be attributed to such external factors; and (6) similar mode of regime transition, with their reforms characterized by regime-initiated and regime-led transition from above. While some degree of variations may exist, China and the former Soviet Union demonstrated no significant divergence in the above six respects.

Why did these two systems, with so many similarities, undergo different transition outcomes? The question itself suggests that these similarities provide us with little leverage for explaining the divergent outcomes and, therefore, are viewed as irrelevant explanatory variables or "rival ex-

C.E.P.S.

planations." They should be eliminated from, rather than incorporated into, consideration as the causal variables. The variations between the transition outcomes in the two largest communist countries are most likely to be explained by the differences between the two countries. What we want to do next is to identify those relevant variables for the explanation.

Taken together, the four major theoretical approaches would constitute four clusters of democratic transition sources—structural, strategic choice, institutional, and political economy—which could serve as the basis for analysis of democratic transition across nations and offer a fairly comprehensive framework within which the causal variables can be situated or identified. Therefore, this article will reconcile these approaches in some combination following the logic of the most similar systems design. By adapting general theories to this particular set of cases and contrasting differences in the most important aspects of the transitions in China and the former Soviet Union, this article sorts out six sets of causal variables that are considered the most critical for the explanation of variation in the dependent variable: (1) the sequencing of political and economic reforms, (2) the generational differences of the communist leadership, (3) the conflicts within the regime and strategic interactions, (4) the role of the military in transitional politics, (5) the role of civil society in transitional politics, and (6) the overall level of socioeconomic modernization. For clarity and simplicity, the comparison will be presented in table 1.

These causal variables are derived deductively from the transition theories. Some of them are political economy-interacted, some institutional context-oriented, some strategic choice- or process-oriented, others social-structural. These six variables, though not necessarily exhaustive, are the most critical in determining the divergent transition outcomes, and in a fundamental sense interrelated or intertwined with one another to produce the different outcomes of transition. However, more importantly, a combination of these six causal variables constitutes a comprehensive and integrated analytical framework which enables us to formulate six hypotheses about the association between these causal variables and the success or failure of democratic transition:

1. The greater the degree of political opening and liberalization, the

Table 1
Causal Variables Explaining the Different Transition Outcomes

	China	The Former Soviet Union
Sequencing of Reforms	Economic liberalization at the expenses of political liberalization and democratization	Simultaneous political/economic liberalization, with political liberalization leading the process
Generational Differences	Transition made under the first generation of the communist leadership	Transition made under the third generation, with the absence of the revolutionary fathers
Intraparty Conflicts and Strategic Interactions	Hard-liners overpower reformers, with nonstrategic interaction between the ruling elites and the dissenters	Reformers overpower conservatives, with strategic interaction between the ruling elites and the opposition elites
Role of the Military	The military heavily involved in transitional politics, loyal to Deng Xiaoping and committed to the party's dictatorial rule	The military rarely involved in transitional politics, neither loyal to the coup leaders nor committed to the party's dictatorial rule
Civil Society	Underdeveloped and disorganized	Stronger and better organized
Level of Socioeconomic Modernization	The structure of society remains unchanged—predominantly agrarian and uneducated; less social support for political change and democratization	The structure of society fundamentally changed; strong social support for political change and democratization

larger the size of legal and political bases for increasing political pluralism and opposition activities, and the more favorable the political conditions for democracy;

2. The greater the influence of the communist revolutionary "founding fathers," the less likely it will be for the reformers to push away obstacles to liberalization, and the less likely the preferable alternatives for political liberalization and democratization;
3. The more the reformers overpower the hard-liners and the more the strategic interaction between the ruling elites and the opposition elites, the more likely the regime will adapt to the changes generated by the reform, tolerate dissident voices, and adopt policies favorable to political liberalization and democratization, and thus the more likely the democratic outcome;
4. The greater the degree of the military's involvement in transitional politics, the more the regime can rely on the use of force to main-

C.E.P.S.

tain its domination through repression and the higher the costs of opposition will increase, and the more remote the possibility of significant political liberalization and democratization;

5. The more the regime allows a civil society to develop, the stronger and the better organized civil society will be, and the greater the degree of political liberalization;
6. The higher the levels of socioeconomic modernization, the more the popular support for democratic change, and the more favorable the social conditions for democracy.

In the pages that follow, we will fully examine the six hypothesized relationships that explain why the two similar systems underwent different outcomes in the transition from communism, with our main focus on Deng's reforms from 1979 to 1991 and Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* from 1985 to 1991.

Explaining the Different Transition Outcomes

This section examines how these independent variables shape regime change in ways that might be especially obstructive of a democratic transition in China, but conducive to such a transition in Russia.

1. Sequencing of Political and Economic Reforms

The sequence of political and economic reforms determines the nature and confines of regime change. Although the process of reform in both China and the Soviet Union was initiated from within the established regime, the sequencing of the political and economic reforms differed from each other, thus leading to different outcomes. Some empirical studies illustrated this very important issue in regime transition and suggested some real lessons about the sequencing of economic and political transition, although the choice of the sequencing model varied across nations.[27]

[27]For the discussion on these lessons, see Encarnación, "The Politics of Dual Transitions,"

I.E.P.S.

There are three sequencing models in the worldwide transition to democracy and the market economy: economic reform precedes political reform, political reform precedes economic reform, and political and economic reforms occur simultaneously. In China, the change was deliberately confined to the realm of economic liberalization, with the focus on reforming the system of economic management and increasing the role of the market, whereas in the former Soviet Union, the transition involved a simultaneous and compound transformation of political, economic, and social relations, with political liberalization and democratization taking the lead. The sole focus on economic liberalization explains the specific nature of the post-Mao reform, and its contrast with the course of events in the former Soviet Union.

Post-Mao Chinese reforms were largely a reaction to the disastrous experiences and consequences of the Cultural Revolution, particularly to the economic stagnation and inefficiency and the destruction of the workings of the party-state apparatus, and the succession struggle after Mao's death. With the death of Mao, Chinese communist leaders realized the need for the reorganization of the socialist economy and political institutions on a new, pragmatic ground and the realization of the "four modernizations" of the country. By 1979, the communist regime initiated policies of limited economic reform and institutional rationalization, in the hope of (1) redefining and justifying the party-state, state-military, politics-economy, and state-society relationships, (2) rationalizing but not liberalizing the centralized planned economy and political institutions, and (3) co-opting the intelligentsia into political and economic institutions.[28] The purpose of the reforms was mainly to adjust economic structures and develop the economy, increase production and the living standards of the Chinese people, and regain the credibility of the party leadership. The re-

481-83; Haggard and Webb, *Voting for Reform*; Bermeo, "Sacrifice, Sequence, and Strength in Successful Dual Transitions," 619-23.

[28]See Guo, "Totalitarianism," 70-86, for the discussion of the three major stages of the 1980s and 1990s economic reform and institutional rationalization, and the assessment of changes and reforms. See Harry Harding, *China's Second Revolution: Reform After Mao* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1987) for a lucid and comprehensive description of the post-Mao reforms and performances.

forms also sought to rationalize the workings of the political system in order to increase efficiency and strengthen the party leadership.

Therefore, the reform strategy was one-dimensional, focusing on the economic sphere, while the reform in the political sphere was extremely restrictive. Political reforms are essentially administrative and rationalizing in nature, such as separating party and state, decentralizing decision-making, streamlining administration, increasing work efficiency, and rationalizing legal systems, without significant and fundamental transformation of the political system, power structure, and ideology. Political reforms were officially regarded as a means of facilitating economic reforms, and served the purpose of strengthening and improving the party leadership. Party leadership claimed that successful and further economic reform required "social stability and unity," and should be carried out only under party leadership. Thus any tendency toward political liberalization and democratization was seen as a threat to such leadership and stability. Democratic reform had little place on the political agenda. As Tatsumi Okabe points out, "It was not a regime transition, but a within-system change (*tizhi gaige*)."[29] Even those rationalization programs in the administrative, legislative, and legal systems were painfully slow and remained weakly institutionalized—actual achievements were meager until the late 1980s.[30]

Rationalization and economic reform had the unintended effect of ideological decay and increasing involvement of student and dissident activism. These reforms also moved an important segment of intellectual dissent into the ranks of the party-state institutions, which expanded the split within the regime between soft-liners and hard-liners. By 1989, reformers within the system attempted to open up more political space, such as more toleration toward the debate on economic and political reforms and more lifting of political taboos. After the suppression in 1989, however, those

[29]Tatsumi Okabe, "China: The Process of Reform," in *Dismantling Communism: Common Causes and Regional Variations*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Seizaburo Sato, and Gerald Segal (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992), 190.

[30]Andrew J. Nathan, *China's Crisis: Dilemmas of Reform and Prospects for Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 178-79.

C.E.P.S.

steps toward more "relaxed" political environment were quickly reversed. Instead, economic liberalization was being matched with political rigidity and repression, more severe violation of individual freedoms and rights of Chinese citizens, more austere control on any liberalizing tendencies both within and outside the regime, and more conservative backlashes in every aspect of political life.

In the Soviet Union, by contrast, political reform was more advanced, even though economic reform lagged behind China's. A dual transition involved a simultaneous transformation of socioeconomic and political structures, characterized by the well-known political vocabulary: *perestroika, glasnost'*, and *demokratizatsiya*. *Perestroika* meant much more than a political reform, encompassing socioeconomic and political change as well as foreign policy; it was a comprehensive program for reshaping political life in the Soviet Union.[31]

Glasnost' was the most significant part of *perestroika*. It was under the heading of *glasnost'* that reformist thought and political liberalization were first introduced. In a comparative study of post-communist transition by Russell Bova, it was found that in every case the transition began with a period of *glasnost'*-like liberalization, typically involving the institutionalization, restoration, or strengthening of the civil rights and liberties of individuals and groups.[32] *Glasnost'* brought striking changes to the Soviet cultural and political scenes. By the summer of 1991, *glasnost'* had dismantled the party's monopoly of the media and its official control over ideology, history, culture, and information. Instead, *glasnost'* strengthened and ensured individual rights of free expression in public and free association, and seriously undermined much of the remaining foundation of the monolithic ideology. Thus it shattered the base of legitimacy of the Soviet communist regime. As a result, the official ideology, the justification of the old regime, was thoroughly discredited and undermined.

---

[31]Gerald M. Easter, "Political Reform in Gorbachev's Russia," in *Toward a More Civil Society? The USSR under Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev*, ed. William Green Miller (New York: Ballinger, 1989), 57-71.

[32]Russell Bova, "Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Perspective," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 119.

C.E.P.S.

Demokratizatsiya was another essential component of *perestroika*. Although *perestroika* was initially stimulated by economic and military concerns, it was not long before political reform and further democratization were brought onto the agenda. The reform moved beyond its original intent toward a more fundamental transformation of Soviet political life. The Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988 witnessed the most wide-ranging and freewheeling political debate on reform of the political system in Soviet history. Much of this debate was played for the entire nation on television. The Party Conference issued a series of resolutions supportive of political reform and democratization, including a resolution entitled "On the Democratization of Soviet Society and Reform of the Political System."[33] These resolutions advocated substantial changes in the Soviet Constitution, the constitutions of the union and autonomous republics, and the statutes of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). At the July plenum following the Nineteenth Party Conference, three issues in particular were moved to the top of the political reform agenda: electoral reform, restructuring of the party apparatus, and major reform of the Supreme Soviet and the office of its president.[34] As Martin Malia noted, by 1988, Gorbachev and his reformist allies had concluded that the existing party was not suited to the goal of *perestroika*. They therefore started to dismantle its structures and at the same time to create a parallel power base for reform by reviving the Soviet apparatus through partially contested elections in 1989 and 1990, a program known as *demokratizatsiya*.[35] As a result, much of the Central Committee Secretariat apparatus and of the policymaking power of the Politburo was taken away.

Democratization also created the opportunity for a genuine democratic or anticommunist opposition to emerge and organize, and provided legal and political bases for increasing political pluralism after 1988. The subsequent development of parliamentary institutions and the establishment of a multiparty system abolished the communist party's monopoly

---

[33]*Pravda*, July 5, 1988, 2.

[34]Easter, "Political Reform in Gorbachev's Russia," 63-71.

[35]Martin Malia, "Leninist Endgame," *Daedalus* 121, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 63.

of power. These revolutionary changes removed the final constraints on the process of democratization, and made the democratic transition inevitable.

2. Generational Differences of the Communist Leadership

The generational difference of the communist leadership is a typical problem in transition from communism because it plays a critical role in the transition process. Changes in the generation of leadership not only determine the relative power of political forces but also set the pace, content, and direction of change.

By the time Gorbachev assumed the position of CPSU General Secretary in 1985, a new generation of political leadership had appeared, establishing a kind of "oligarchic" rule. In contrast, in post-Mao China, Deng's regime was characterized by paternalistic rule, in which power, including military power, was actually dictated and manipulated by Deng Xiaoping.

In Soviet history, the Soviet Union witnessed six leadership successions. The deaths of Lenin in 1924 and Stalin in 1953 led to transitional periods characterized by succession crises, in which a power vacuum existed until a new leader emerged. In Khrushchev's era, an oligarchic structure of Soviet "collective leadership" was established in order to undermine and avoid another personal dictatorship. As Gerald M. Easter states: "Over the next decades, oligarchy became a basic feature of Soviet leadership. . . . The oligarchic structure of leadership as it evolved under Brezhnev survived his death and the subsequent *interregnum* period of Andropov and Chernenko. When Gorbachev assumed the reins of leadership, he too was confronted with the preestablished constraints of the oligarchic structure,"[36] without paramount authority or absolute power, or the ability to dictate to the political leadership. This structure, under certain conditions, was favorable to the Soviet regime change and democratic transition.

Most important, however, is that power had in fact shifted into the hands of a younger generation of leaders. This generation of leaders rep-

[36]Easter, "Political Reform in Gorbachev's Russia," 49-50.

C.E.P.S.

resented the final completion of the transition from revolutionary to technocratic leadership. As Richard Sakwa noted,

> Gorbachev represents the third generation of Soviet leaders. The first were the Old Bolsheviks, Lenin's colleagues who made the revolution and who were destroyed by Stalin. The second generation was the Stalinist one, which included Khrushchev, Brezhnev and their successors. Gorbachev's generation has experienced years of reform and counter-reform since 1953, and for them the Revolution is already a fading historical memory.[37]

This third generation of Soviet leaders had more formal and technical education than earlier generations, and had no direct experience with the communist revolution and Stalin's regime, but were, however, more aware of their failures and flaws, and therefore were more reform-minded and liberal-oriented. Gorbachev and his reformist allies recognized the urgent need for political reform and comprehensive change in the structures much more thoroughly than did their Chinese counterparts, and thus their commitment to reform was deeper. They believed that a comprehensive reform strategy, with political reform as the top priority in the socioeconomic and political sphere, was necessary for the successful structural transformation of Soviet society and for political institutions to adapt to the changing society and its increased pluralism and complexity.

By contrast, post-Mao China made its transition under its first generation of the communist leadership,[38] and witnessed another paternalistic ruler, although it was this very ruler who first advocated the establishment of "collective leadership" in the party and state leadership system. From Mao to Deng, Chinese political leadership underwent just one succession, and retained the basic feature of paternalistic dictatorship. Deng Xiaoping, although he had publicly declared his retirement, was the paramount authority, above the party, the state, the military, and even ideology. He dominated and manipulated policymaking and had the final say in every important policy area. His thoughts and remarks were looked upon as imperial

[37]Richard Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms 1985-1990* (New York: Philip Allan, 1990), 160.

[38]Deng and Mao were contemporaries in the Chinese communist revolution, and should be viewed as the first-generation communist revolutionary "founding fathers."

C.E.P.S.

edicts and sacred tenets. Therefore, his personal belief, judgment, and sensitivity to the environment were of central importance in the outcome of power struggle, the major policymaking, and objectives, domains, and forms of regime change.

Furthermore, in China the transition from revolutionary to technocratic leadership was far from complete. The surviving revolutionary "founding fathers," despite public proclamations of their retirement, had never really retired, and continued to intervene in decision-making and block political reform. Deng's successors, the liberal reformist leaders of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, lacked strong and effective power to push through a more liberal political reform. Their bolder attempts in this sphere or their support of more liberal reform would have invited strong attacks from revolutionary elders including Deng Xiaoping, and they were finally ousted from office.

In Russia, the conservatives had been defeated. Particularly in the later period of reform, Gorbachev was confronted most often with opposition from radical liberals who wanted more change than he had offered or from nationalist movements of the Soviet republics that insisted on more and more latitude and independent status. The Soviet process showed that, when democratic parliamentary elections were taking place in the Soviet Union and the radical reform program of marketization and privatization was adopted by Boris Yeltsin's Russian parliament, Gorbachev turned against or slowed down full democratization, rendering himself the stumbling block to further reform. He received more and more attacks and was finally pushed away by radical liberals. The tensions between the radical reformers in Russia and other more radical republics and the conservatism of the Union government increased significantly. Gorbachev's time was over. After the August coup, he was naturally replaced by radical reformist leader Yeltsin.

However, in China, the conservatives were not defeated; those surviving revolutionary elders remained a great influence on Chinese politics and regime change. Every effort for greater political and ideological pluralism always suffered a great loss and was followed by a strong conservative backlash. Party hard-liners were not committed heart and soul to real reform in the communist system and structures. Contrasting the experience

C.E.P.S.

of political development and reform in these two communist countries suggests that a democratic transition calls for a new generation of leadership.

3. Conflicts within the Regime and Strategic Choices

Many empirical studies have suggested that the resolution of conflicts within the ruling party and the strategic interactions play a key role in determining different modes of transition and bringing down the old regime. Huntington argues that three principal groups exist within the ruling elite during the course of transition: "standpatters," "liberal reformers," and "democratic reformers." These groups are defined in terms of their basic attitudes toward democracy and the extent to which they want to break with the past. The key to the success of a democratic transition largely depends on the ability of the liberal and democratic reformers in the government coalition to fend off the antidemocratic standpatters within the communist party.[39] "Transition from above" usually evolves through three major phases: the emerging of reformers, the acquiring of power by reformers, and finally, democratic transition.[40]

Reformers did appear in both countries, but in China reformers failed to acquire real power. They were without a final say in the most critical and important policy issues and especially lacked military support. Any decision that the reformers reached collectively could be reversed by Deng and his old revolutionary colleagues. The splits and conflicts within the regime were resolved not in favor of the liberal reformers but of the hard-liners. Two of Deng's hand-picked successors were removed from office. In contrast, the reformers in the former Soviet Union succeeded in acquiring power, due to the absence of the old revolutionary "founding fathers," and therefore the reformers were able to remove the hard-liners from office, eliminating this obstacle to communist regime change and reducing constraints on their actions. The presence or absence of the old revolutionary "founding fathers" made a significant difference in the resolution of the

[39]Samuel P. Huntington, "How Countries Democratize," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (Winter 1991-92): 588-89.
[40]Ibid., 593-94.

C.E.P.S.

conflicts within the ruling elites, and thus had a decisive effect on the differences of transition outcome in the two countries.

For the strategic choices, one important dimension is the strategic interaction among the ruling elites. A key factor influencing the outcome of strategic interaction is the balance of power between reformers and hard-liners. The more the reformers overpower the conservatives, the more likely the regime will adapt to the change generated by reforms. However, this pattern is largely contingent on the resolution of intraparty conflicts.[41]

As discussed above, due to the presence of the old revolutionary "founding fathers," who were still in control in China, and the unfavorable resolution of the intraparty conflicts for the liberal reformers, the reformers were very weak, despite their reform policies enjoying popular support. The party hard-liners and all conservative forces, backed by those powerful "founding fathers," were strong enough to overpower the reformers and resist any tendency toward political liberalization and democratic reform. They had the resolve to maintain the party's monopolistic power and the communist ideology and political system. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the balance of power within the regime was favorable to the reformers in general and the democratic reformists in particular, due to the absence of powerful old revolutionary "founding fathers" and the removal of hard-liners under Gorbachev's regime. The reformers in the leadership encountered much less resistance from the conservative forces, and they had the resolve to undertake a more fundamental transformation of political structures and institutions, moving the country toward political pluralism and democracy.

Another key factor is the strategic interaction between the ruling elites and the opposition elites. Gary Marks uses game theory to model a strategic interaction with two sets of scenarios: "nonstrategic" and "strategic" interactions between the ruling elites and the political opposition in a setting of an authoritarian rule. Each of the two groups has two strategic choices: the ruling elite may decide to suppress or tolerate the political op-

---

[41]John T. Ishiyama, "Communist Parties in Transition: Structures, Leaders, and Processes of Democratization in Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1995): 158.

position; the political opposition may decide to abide by or challenge the imposed rules of the regime. The elite choice in the *nonstrategic scenario* is that the decision to suppress or tolerate does not involve the interaction between the ruling elite and the political opposition; the ruling elite chooses a particular course of action irrespective of the response of the political opposition, no matter what the political opposition does. The elite choice in the *strategic scenario* is that the decision to suppress or tolerate involves the interaction between the ruling elite and the political opposition, in which the ruling elite selects a particular course of action respective of the anticipated response of the political opposition. "Nonstrategic" suppression is most likely, e.g., the ruling elite decides to suppress no matter what the opposition does, if they calculate that the costs of toleration for the ruling elite are the costs of losing monopolistic control of the government multiplied by the probability of losing that monopoly as a result of liberalizing the regime.[42]

The nonstrategic suppression nicely fits the situation in China. For Deng Xiaoping and the hard-liners, the regime would have risked losing monopolistic power if it had tolerated opposition. Both Deng's one-dimensional reform and nonstrategic suppression were actually prompted by the same calculation of the costs of toleration to opposition. Therefore, opposition or dissidents were never tolerated and nonstrategic suppression was ruthless and brutal throughout the periods of Deng's reform, from the suppression of the "Beijing Spring" dissident movement in the early 1980s to the bloody crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen student movement and the thereafter suppression.

While dissident and student activism was active prior to 1989, opposition parties and groups were never developed (they were illegal and rigorously banned). Any attempt to register an independent political group or party would suffer political persecution and the activists would be charged with attempting to "sow social unrest" or "disturbing social stability and unity"; the members of any "underground" political groups would ex-

---

[42]Gary Marks, "Rational Sources of Chaos in Democratic Transition," *American Behavioral Scientist* 35, no. 4/5 (March/June 1992): 398-405.

perience persecution and imprisonment. Those nonpolitical professional groups, clubs, or associations had to register with the party/state institutions or the official mass organizations, and were severely hampered by government restrictions and prohibited from engaging in political activity. Therefore, "dissidents" and "student activists," rather than "opposition," would be more accurate terms for describing these social forces.[43]

Moreover, dissidents and student activists largely restricted themselves to the domain permitted by the party line and at times turning to street demonstration. Most activists basically took a moderate stand, in the sense that they abided by the imposed rules of the regime and even supported the regime-initiated reform, favoring a moderate strategy that China should move toward democracy gradually and peacefully. Where they differed from the ruling elite in the strategic choice was that they requested a broader scope and faster pace of liberalization in the political sphere.

However, even such a moderate stand was never tolerated by the party hard-liners and, therefore, the mode of transition by "transplacement" or "pact"[44] was impossible. As Andrew J. Nathan points out, "The lack of intermediary forces to serve as active partners in a transitional process"[45] put the soft-liners within the regime in difficulty and left them with little choice. While the prevailing of the hard-liners determined the parameters of political action of the soft-liners on the one hand, meanwhile, on the other, "nonstrategic" suppression made the cost of opposition very high, thus making the development of a well-organized opposition impossible

[43]"Dissidents" can be defined as freethinkers of various types, either within or outside the communist regime, such as Wei Jingsheng, Fang Lizhi, Wu Zuguang, Yan Jiaqi, and the like, who advance their political beliefs or opinions publicly, without a fixed organizational configuration.

[44]For a full discussion on modes of transition and their significance in transition, see Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," 379; Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 114; Huntington, "How Countries Democratize," 582-83; Donald Share and Scott Mainwaring, "Transitions through Transaction: Democratization in Brazil and Spain," in *Political Liberalization in Brazil: Dynamics, Dilemmas, and Future Prospects*, ed. Wayne A. Selcher (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), 177-79; Karl and Schmitter, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe"; Hermann Giliomee, "Democratization in South Africa," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (1995): 83-104.

[45]Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Path from Communism," *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 2 (1993): 41.

C.E.P.S.

and the possibility of strategic interaction between the regime and the opposition remote. Such a political environment was particularly obstructive of a democratic transition. As Marks noted, in a nonstrategic scenario, "the ruling elite maintains a tight grip on the political arena, signaling its absolute preference for suppression by the decisiveness and brutality with which it deals with any brave enough to challenge it."[46]

In the Soviet Union, by contrast, due to Gorbachev's *glasnost'* and *demokratizatsiya*, the opposition was developed and enjoyed a relatively larger public parameter and a legitimate institutional base. Opposition was much more developed and organized, forming thousands of independent political "groups," "unions," or "movements," etc. Their activities on the political platform were legitimized and even encouraged by the Gorbachev regime. In an oft-cited speech made by Gorbachev in early 1989, he appealed to the opposition, "You keep up the pressure. We'll press from the top, and you press from the bottom. Only in that way can *perestroika* succeed."[47] Continued pressures from below for further democratization and ending the CPSU's monopoly on power won the consent of Gorbachev's regime, and Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution was formally abolished by the Congress of People's Deputies in March 1990. This completely cleared the way for the development of opposition parties and organizations.

In the transition process, Gorbachev's reformists were closely allied with the leaders of the independent political movements and organizations against the resistance of communist conservatives both within and outside the party leadership. A sort of cooperative interaction between Gorbachev's reformists and the opposition leaders constituted a central feature of the strategic scenario under the Gorbachev regime. Strategic choices made by Gorbachev's reformists and independent political movements influenced each other. An informal coalition between elites helped them work together to reach compromises and carried through *glasnost'*, *demokratizatsiya*, and *perestroika*, which ultimately brought down the Soviet communist regime. Such dynamics stand in sharp contrast to the situation un-

[46]Marks, "Rational Sources of Chaos in Democratic Transition," 404.
[47]*New York Times*, February 21, 1989, A3.

C.E.P.S.

der the nonstrategic scenario in post-Mao China.

4. The Role of the Military in Transitional Politics

Transitional politics involves the redistribution of power resources, the balance of power among the conflicting political forces, and the uncertainty in the course of transition. The role of the military in transitional politics is decisive in determining the outcome of the clash between political forces at critical moments of crisis.

The Chinese communist revolution was much more militant and experienced a much longer civil war than the Russian October Revolution. The Chinese civil war, which preceded the seizure of power, lasted on and off for twenty-two years from August 1927 until October 1949.[48] The Chinese revolution experienced a lengthy and difficult militant process, spreading from rural areas to urban areas, during which the major task of the revolution, as the CCP revolutionary leaders repeatedly proclaimed, was a "military struggle." The party and the revolution were anchored and developed in the poorest parts of the rural areas, where the CCP had to set up and develop its own strong armed forces, from the Red Army to the PLA, in order to overthrow the Kuomintang military regime, in which Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and other revolutionary "founding fathers" had established a power base of their own in the CCP by creating the military troops and leading the military struggle successfully. They took it for granted that this army, the PLA, was the private property of the CCP, and particularly of themselves, although they publicly proclaimed that this was a "People's Army," and they required the PLA and its officers at various levels to be "absolutely loyal to the party," and particularly to themselves.

Since these revolutionary "founding fathers" had constantly occupied the most important top positions in the party, the military, and the state, they had great influence on and deep roots in the army, despite having no nominal positions in the power structure. Since 1949 the PLA had been sub-

---

[48]Jonathan R. Adelman, "The Impact of Civil Wars on Communist Political Culture: The Chinese and Russian Cases," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 16, no. 1 (March 1983): 31.

C.E.P.S.

stantially involved in the various political movements and the formation of domestic and foreign policies, and had constantly played a significant role in the post-revolutionary political and socioeconomic sphere as well as in the successive regime changes.[49]

The Russian October Revolution and the following civil war had sharply different features. In the pre-1917 gestation, the Russian revolutionaries and the party were largely in the underground and exile, and engaged mainly in political and economic struggle. The October Revolution of 1917 was actually a quick and sudden workers' upheaval and military insurrection "in the twin cosmopolitan capitals of Moscow and Petrograd," then spreading from the cities to the countryside.[50] The Russian civil war came after the October Revolution and lasted two and a half years, from 1918 to November 1920. The major military task for the Red Army was to maintain and consolidate the emerging post-revolutionary regime and protect national security. Therefore the Soviet army, unlike its counterpart in China, never played a significant role either before the seizure of power or in the post-revolutionary politics and the successive regime changes. Neither the Soviet revolutionary "founding fathers" nor their successors had deep roots or unique personal authority in the Soviet military to influence the regime change.

It is not surprising that in August 1991 the Soviet armed forces did not act as resolutely as the PLA did in June 1989. The PLA's response in 1989 was due to the ability of Deng Xiaoping and the surviving revolutionary elders to retain their effective control over the party, and especially over the military. Deng flew south to Wuhan city to convene a secret military meeting, at which he himself made the decisions and the military arrangements,

---

[49]For fuller discussions on the civil-military relations in China and the Soviet Union, see Jonathan R. Adelman, *The Revolutionary Armies: The Historical Development of the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Yang Zhong, "Civil-Military Relations in Changing Communist Societies: A Comparative Study of China and the Soviet Union," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 24, no. 1 (March 1991): 77-102. For more discussions on the PLA, see John Gittings, *The Role of Chinese Army* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927-1971* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

[50]Adelman, "The Impact of Civil Wars on Communist Political Culture," 33.

despite the fact that he personally had no legal power to take these actions. The various battlefield armies of the PLA, including tank units and airborne forces, were deployed in the crackdown on the Beijing student democratic movement. In the Soviet case, by contrast, the junta in the August coup, although all of them were in office, had no effective control over the military. The authority of the junta was not more credible than that of the elected Yeltsin government. The military was deeply divided along generational lines and even between services. Some tank units supported Boris Yeltsin, and some commanders kept their troops in their barracks.[51] The Soviet conservatives could not rely on the military for a successful coup to influence the regime change or to suppress the democratic choice of the people, because the military maintained a relatively neutral position at the critical moment in the regime change and political transition. Moreover, no one had absolute authority or effective control over the military, in sharp contrast to the Chinese case. In China, incipient "liberalizing" tendencies could still be kept effectively in check through both organizational and coercive means if necessary.

5. Civil Society in Transitional Politics

Presence or absence of a strong and organized civil society makes a significant difference in the transition from communism to democracy. Civil society, in the context of communist countries, refers primarily to the public realm between the state and the private sphere. Under the communist regime, this "intermediate" public sphere is state-controlled, state-led, or state-certified, since the state controls this sphere to a great extent. Total ban on free association and independent social organization is one of the essential defining features of totalitarianism. Typical for a civil society is its independence from the state, and the building of such a civil society with independent social institutions and organizations is an integral part of democratic transition. Such a civil society is a "proving ground" for democracy, for it is in this realm that the social forces act as checks on the

---

[51]Gerald Segal, "China and the Disintegration of the Soviet Union," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 9 (September 1992): 852.

ruler and can be well organized and prepared to provoke a real challenge to the regime while citizens can develop a democratic attitude and mentality.[52] Therefore, whether or not the regime allows civil society to develop or to what extent it is permitted to develop will also determine the nature of regime change and the outcome of transition.

Thus a key factor in the transition to democracy is whether or not the party/state apparatus will permit the development of civil society to undermine their monopoly on power and transfer substantial public assets to private persons.[53] Under communist regimes, economic reform or economic liberalization itself, without substantial privatization,[54] will not necessarily create a civil society, but only provides certain opportunities for the emergence of social or economic institutions, which may have little function of applying pressure and checks on the regime. Democratic transition requires real negotiations between the ruling elites and the opposition groups. Such dialogue can occur "only if the undemocratic regime is not totalitarian, showing limited toleration toward opposition groups."[55]

Geoffrey A. Hosking and others trace the evolution of independent political movements that emerged in the Soviet Union in 1986 and detail the major actions of hundreds of political groups in the period of *perestroika* since 1986, particularly in such key events as the election of Boris Yeltsin to the presidency of Russia and the failure of the attempted coup in August 1991. It was these opposition groups and organizations that in 1988 started seriously to challenge the CPSU's dominant role, substantially contributing to its eventual downfall and to the breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.[56]

---

[52]Bart van Steenbergen, "Transition from Authoritarian/Totalitarian Systems: Recent Developments in Central and Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective," *Futures*, March 1992, 164.

[53]Karl and Philippe, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," 272.

[54]See Guo, "Totalitarianism," 77-78, for the definition of "privatization" and the discussion of the actual situation in China.

[55]Richard Rose, "Postcommunism and the Problem of Trust," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (July 1994): 20.

[56]Geoffrey A. Hosking, Jonathan Aves, and Peter J.S. Duncan, *The Road to Post-Communism: Independent Political Movements in the Soviet Union, 1985-1991* (New York: Printer, 1992);

In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's *glasnost'* and call for social input were met with a surprising response. Between 1986 and 1988, there was an explosion of independent group activity, with approximately thirty thousand "informal groups" going public or forming anew. By early 1989, there were at least sixty thousand. A large number of them were involved in political life. By 1990, at least five hundred parties of various sorts existed in Soviet society.[57] Although the goals were quite diverse, these independent organizations played a significant role in undermining the CPSU's legitimacy and authority.

Some of the informal groups, with names such as "Front," "Movement," "Union," "Club," or "Forum," associated their political goals with changes of the Soviet system, consistently pressing for political and legal reforms. Others posed more serious challenges to the communist regime, claiming to be alternative political parties, consistently calling for the elimination of the one-party system and the installation of parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press, independence for trade union, marketization, and privatization.[58] Some other movements and organizations based on ethnic differences and nationalistic sentiments pleaded for the independence of their countries, creating a more dangerous and destructive threat to the Soviet totalitarian center.

The restoration and politicization of civil society strongly challenged the omnipotence of the party-state, inspired pluralism and pluralization both within and outside the party-state structures, and greatly contributed to the downfall of the Soviet communist regime. Facing the challenge, Gorbachev's regime kept trying to find a way to institutionalize the growing pluralization of society, and at the same time to ensure the civil rights of citizens through further democratic reform and legal actions.[59] This led to the acceleration of the democratizing transition in the Soviet Union.

---

their study also contains an appendix, listing the Soviet Union's major independent political organizations as of late 1991.

[57]Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms*, 203.

[58]Gerald M. Easter and Anne M. Gruber, "The Dynamics of Change in Contemporary Soviet Society," in Miller, *Toward a More Civil Society?* 32-33.

[59]Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms*, 203.

I.E.P.S.

In contrast, the Chinese communist regime never allowed any independent political organization or movement to develop in the post-Mao reform. Dissident or student activism was suppressed. The existence of a powerful party-state apparatus, including an army that committed itself to the party's dictatorial rule, coupled with the absence of strong and independent social forces such as autonomous political groups and organizations, strongly limited the development of pluralism and the democratic movement, and contributed to an outcome different from that in the Soviet Union.

After the communist takeover of power in China, the previously existing structures of civil society were destroyed and replaced by official "mass organizations" controlled by party-state apparatus. The post-Mao economic liberalization and rationalization did not bring about any substantial change in this regard. The lack of secondary, voluntary associations mediating between state and individual persisted during the post-Mao reform. Any political dissent organizations were severely suppressed, and truly independent associations and non-state-penetrated organizations were not permitted. Chinese popular dissatisfaction could not be transformed into effective organized opposition, which was legally forbidden, and open challenges to the legitimacy of the party leadership and the political system were severely suppressed. Civil liberties and rights had been and continued to be neglected, abused, and often taken away. Dissidents were harassed, tortured, and imprisoned simply for holding or publicly advocating opinions and beliefs contrary to those that are officially forbidden. People's demands to participate were only selectively recognized and accommodated by party-state organizations or official "mass organizations" that had in fact been institutionalized into bureaucratic organs. Thus these organizations did not represent the interests of social classes, communities, or individuals, but were subordinated to the party leadership. Student or popular dissatisfaction was therefore forced to be transformed into illegal street demonstrations. From 1986 to 1989, there were a number of student protests, largely directed against some specific policies or social phenomena, such as food price rise in university student cafeterias, the influx of foreign consumer goods, and corruption, rather than against the party leadership or the political system itself. "There is little evidence to suggest that

C.E.P.S.

political dissenters have played the same role in China that they have played in the other communist states."[60]

In light of the critical role played by "informal groups" or "civil associations" in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it is hardly accidental that Chinese dictators gave their highest priority during the 1989 crackdown on the democratic movement to smashing the independent labor organizations, student organizations, and newspapers that emerged during the two months of the 1989 movement. By crushing the incipient independent organizations, arresting their leaders, and intimidating their supporters, Deng Xiaoping effectively broke the back of the democratic movement.

However, studies on civil society in China have often been unsatisfactory. Some scholarly attention has been given to "democratic elites" in the "democratic reform" or "processes of democratization" in China, but these concepts are either misused or used without appropriate definition, and the studies are not well conducted, heavily relying on personal interviews with some Chinese dissidents or former members of Hu Yaobang's intellectual network or being crafted from a simplistic account of Deng's reforms (in one case, supported by a questionnaire administered to a small, nonrandom sample of twenty Chinese citizens).[61] Others focus on the new classes in China and argue that these new classes have become aware of the need for democracy and legal protection against the state and that the younger generation rejects the Leninist communist regime.[62] However, little evidence can support this argument. To the contrary, as discussed above, so-called "democratic reform," "political liberalization," or "democratization" was never initiated and effected by the communist regime. The bloody crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy movement and the continuing repression thereafter were more evident in the post-Deng transitional

---

[60]Stephen White, John Gardner, and George Schopflin, *Communist Political Systems: An Introduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 267.

[61]Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Jing Lin, *The Opening of the Chinese Mind: Democratic Changes in China since 1978* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994).

[62]Ronald M. Glassman, *China in Transition: Communism, Capitalism, and Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

C.E.P.S.

politics than these studies have suggested.

6. Overall Level of Socioeconomic Modernization

In the literature on the correlation between democratic preconditions and political development, "the key variable" that has received the most attention is the overall level of a country's socioeconomic modernization.[63] In terms of this crucial criterion, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, Soviet society would certainly have been more ripe for political reform and democracy than Chinese society. Consideration of the overall socioeconomic modernization can provide a partial explanation for the dynamics of social change and for the success of the democratic transition in the Soviet Union and the failure of such a transition in China.

Soviet society over the past seventy years underwent fundamental changes that altered the structure of society and the attitudes of its citizens. The level of socioeconomic modernization in the Soviet Union was much higher than that in China, and the complexity of Soviet society and economy was greater than that in China, and therefore the new Soviet leadership and the driving forces for reform showed more in-depth appreciation of the dynamics of social change.

By the late 1960s, Soviet society was no longer predominantly agrarian and uneducated. Urban residents were 66 percent of the population in 1987, and 67.5 percent in 1990. More than 70 percent of the Soviet population over ten years of age had at least secondary or higher education, with 80.5 percent of the labor force having at least secondary or higher education. In addition to increases in education, nearly every Soviet citizen had access to newspapers, journals, radio, and television. By 1986, 93 percent of the population had access to television. The increasing complexity and expansion of the Soviet economy over the past several decades, along with increasing urbanization and education levels, led to a decline of blue-collar workers in the labor force. By 1987, over 26 percent of the labor force was white-collar workers. In urban centers, roughly 40 percent of the residents

---

[63]Bova, "Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition," 133; Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 78.

belonged to this social group.[64] The Soviet intelligentsia, technocrat, and managerial groups, and other new social groups that emerged from this process became more significant in socioeconomic activities. However, the existing socioeconomic system remained for the most part unchanged. By 1990, the failure of the political system to adapt to the changing society, along with economic stagnation and the decline of living standards in the previous two decades, had led to increasing dissatisfaction of the Soviet people with their political system and socioeconomic structures. Many studies have provided empirical data to support the correlation between education and public support for political change and democratic transition in the former Soviet Union.[65]

China, by contrast, had not undergone fundamental changes in the structure of society by the late 1980s. Although China achieved remarkable economic growth in the 1980s, the structure of society remained for the most part unchanged, with its comprehensive index as the 96th of 120 countries and areas in the world. The level of urbanization was very low; with only 20.9 percent of the population living in urban areas, Chinese society remained predominantly agrarian and uneducated.[66]

The educational level of the Chinese population remained very low, even lower than that in India. A quarter of the total world illiterate population of 900 million was in China. About 210 of these 220 million illiterate inhabitants lived in rural areas. The average schooling for Chinese over 15 years of age was less than 6 years. The enrollment rates of colleges and high schools were 2 percent and 36 percent, respectively. Of the labor force, 8.5 percent was white-collar and 91.5 percent engaged in agriculture and other physical work. In the latter category, the percentage of illiterates was the highest and the average years of education was 4.8, with almost

---

[64]Easter and Gruber, "The Dynamics of Change in Contemporary Soviet Society," 4-5.

[65]Ada W. Finifter and Ellen Mickiewicz, "Redefining the Political System of the USSR: Mass Support for Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 4 (December 1992): 857-74; Arthur H. Miller, William M. Reisinger, and Vicki L. Hesli, eds., *Public Opinion and Regime Change: The New Politics of Post-Soviet Societies* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993).

[66]CCP Central Propaganda Department, ed., "Reform, Development, and Modernization" (official internal document), May 20, 1990.

zero percent having college education. Among the trained workers, 47.9 percent had elementary education, 11.4 percent had high school education, and 0.9 percent received college education.[67]

In a society with a predominantly rural and uneducated population, the attitudes of citizens also showed undemocratic attributes and ignorance of the necessity for political change or democratic reform. A national survey run by a research institute of the Ministry of State Security in December 1988 showed that most people were concerned with corruption, inflation, inequality of social distribution, and social security, rather than democratic reforms.[68] Another survey conducted in China in 1990 reported that Chinese inhabitants scored low levels on all the three sets of attitudes—"awareness of government's impact," "system efficacy," and "tolerance" —oft-cited as the cultural requisites for democracy based on Almond and Verba's pioneering works. This suggests potential difficulties for democratic transition or impediments to democratization.[69] As Andrew Nathan noted, "Students and intellectuals, after all, are only a tiny minority in this vast peasant country. Most of the people care little about politics and are absorbed in scratching out a living."[70] There is no doubt that such socioeconomic conditions and attitudes of citizens were not favorable to democratic transition, although this is not to say that democratization in China must wait until a fundamental change occurred both in the structure of society and the attitude of citizens.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a democratic transition has not occurred in China and a liberal and pluralist democracy has not been inaugurated in China. If power is defined as "the ability to determine who plays the game,

[67]Ibid., May 20, July 20, and August 14, 1990.

[68]Ibid., August 14, 1990, 14.

[69]Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey," *Daedalus* 122, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 95-123.

[70]Nathan, *China's Crisis*, 118.

or to define the rules, or to change the values within the payoff matrix,"[71] then we could argue that the Chinese communist regime still has a tight grip on monopolistic power and the ability to do all it wants to do. The fundamental structure of the communist political system has remained intact since the post-Mao reform. The central question thus becomes why did the democratic transition that occurred in the former Soviet Union fail to occur in post-Mao China?

This article has examined how certain causal variables shape regime change in ways that might be especially obstructive of a democratic transition in post-Mao China, but conducive to such a transition in the former Soviet Union. The sequencing of political and economic reforms determines the nature of transition/reform and the divergent patterns of social change. The generational differences of leadership, conflicts within the ruling elites, and types of strategic interactions determine the relative power of different political forces, define the parameters of political actions and strategic choices, and set the sequence, pace, content, and direction of transition/reform. The role of the military in transitional politics is decisive in determining the outcome of the clash between political forces at critical moments of political crisis. The forces of civil society and the level of socioeconomic modernization constitute the constraining effect of social and structural conditions on the process of democratization. These causal variables are in a fundamental sense interrelated or intertwined with one another—one overlaps and reinforces another.

A combination of these six causal variables constitutes a comprehensive and integrated analytical framework which allows us to formulate hypotheses and explore the causal connections between the key forces and the transition outcomes, to provide a multidimensional approach to the divergent experiences of the two largest communist countries in the era of transition from communism, and thus to develop a more accurate and adequate explanation of why the democratic transition that occurred in the former Soviet Union failed to occur in China.

---

[71] Stephen D. Krasner, "Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier," *World Politics* 43, no. 3 (April 1991): 340.

The six hypotheses generated by this integrated analytical framework account for different aspects of the regime change; only together are they sufficient to explain the question. The analysis of these six hypothesized relationships has offered an adequate causal explanation, and it has also demonstrated the analytical strength of the research strategy in our case—different approaches work better in combination than alone. Change in these variables may move post-Deng China in a more or less authoritarian or democratic direction. Some of these variables, under certain circumstances, may play a more significant role than others in the future transition in the post-Deng era, and they may deserve to be examined in more detail. However, the purpose of this article is not to detail how things happened but explain why they happened. The result is predictable. Due to the pattern of economic liberalization at the expense of human rights and political reforms, a path of gradual pluralization and democratization with a "regime-initiated" feature would be the most likely course for post-Deng China, although other outcomes are also possible.

C.E.P.S.