

SPECIAL BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Gordon G. Chang's

The Coming Collapse of China

(New York: Random House, 2001), 344 pages.

Gordon Chang's *The Coming Collapse of China* and the Question of Methodology

Gordon Chang's *The Coming Collapse of China* is a controversial book that boldly predicts the imminent collapse of the communist regime in mainland China—the party that has led the most populous country in the world through the most rapid of growth over the last two decades. If economic performance, particularly in terms of growth, is the single most important legitimating mechanism in a developing country, then one should predict the diametrically opposite, i.e., the strengthening of the developmental state of China amidst ostensibly unstoppable high growth. In addition to growth, the ability of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime to manage the business cycle, contain inflation, and manage a "soft landing" in the 1990s is equally impressive. What possible reasoning would motivate Gordon Chang to come up with such a dismal prediction of the Chinese communist regime?

Chang's arguments rest on many facts that are well known to China watchers all over the world: the shock of World Trade Organization (WTO) entry, waves of factory closedowns, the swelling of the ranks of the unemployed, a rapidly growing income gap between classes and regions, labor unrest, the banking crisis, the stock market bubble, ecological disasters,

and various other grave challenges to both economy and society. The existence of such problems did not, however, hinder mainland China from achieving remarkable growth in the past nor lessen the regime's total control over society. Even though such social problems may become further aggravated in the future, there still seems no sufficient ground from which to announce the coming breakdown of the system. The growth of China's economy has possibly reached its peak, as the slowing down of the economy in the latter half of the 1990s clearly shows, and the dark side of China's development could thus become so overwhelming that a delicate balance is tilted, and the system begins to show cracks that ultimately may lead to an overall breakdown. Such a scenario, however, seems a long- or at least mid-term prediction and does not warrant warnings of the regime's "coming collapse."

I would not question the sincerity of the author or his astute instincts. He probably does see signs that prove sufficient to convince him that the system is not likely to hold up for long. There is a strong conviction in his remarks that repeatedly reveals itself: a morally corrupt regime such as China's simply cannot survive long. Translated to political science jargon, this means an authoritarian regime with no legitimacy in the eyes of the people cannot sustain its rule for a long duration of time. Putting together economic and moral judgments, and giving the benefit of doubt to the author's sincerity, one still does not, however, reach the same conclusion of a coming collapse of China; at the very least one is led to question how the author came up with such a prediction. One is tempted to ask what methodology has the author used. Unfortunately, Chang's methods are not clearly presented in the book.

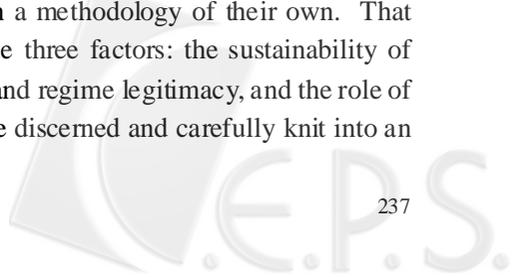
Nevertheless, *The Coming Collapse of China* is an exciting and challenging piece of work for it arouses academic debate concerning the stability—both now and in the future—of the CCP regime. Those predicting stability must also reveal their methodology before we can accept their ostensibly plausible conclusions. Growth and stability of the last two decades is not a sufficient reason to predict growth and stability in the future. Those endorsing the cyclical theory of social development would predict slowdown and instability in the coming years. One thus has to

delve into the factors that determine stability in the Chinese system and come up with a theory that knits those factors together before any prediction can be made. In this way, *The Coming Collapse of China* is immature from a social scientific standpoint, although the author does not need to care much about social science given that the book is intended for general readers.

If one takes a careful look at the way in which the European communist regimes collapsed in 1989-91, one finds that intra-regime power struggle is as equally important as the overall deterioration of the social and economic conditions as a factor causing the meltdown of those systems. There is a conspicuous lack of discussion in regard to the ruling elite in *The Coming Collapse of China*, seemingly suggesting that the Chinese system would break down without a precipitating intra-party struggle. This is not plausible. The coincidence and interactions of social malaise and high-level power struggle are necessary conditions for the breakdown of an autonomous communist regime. Actually, the existence of economic and social crises alone cannot lead one to predict imminent collapse of the regime, as the North Korean example vividly proves.

In addition to elite politics, predictors of regime collapse/stability should present a theory concerning the relations between economic growth and regime legitimacy—a subject of contention in the field. For example, both the regime and its critics welcome China's post-Tiananmen economic prosperity for different reasons. Chinese leaders in the Forbidden City delight in seeing a booming economy and restored political stability under the party's full control. The critics, on the other hand, cast their hope on the modernizing and liberalizing effect of continued economic development and predict a possible political transformation in the early twenty-first century. Who is right? Can they be both correct?

The lack of methodological sophistication in *The Coming Collapse of China* is no proof that its prediction is wrong. Those predicting the opposite outcome should come up with a methodology of their own. That methodology should at least integrate three factors: the sustainability of growth, the relation between growth and regime legitimacy, and the role of elite politics. Before these factors are discerned and carefully knit into an



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explanatory framework, one cannot accept or reject what Chang predicts. *The Coming Collapse of China* poses an intellectual challenge to the academic world, not in proving or disproving his predictions, but in examining our own methodologies.

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