

A Coming Collapse or a Regime Effective in Managing Dissent?

Gordon G. Chang's book is a worthwhile read. This analysis deserves credit for challenging the orthodox view that predicts China will become a powerhouse in the near future. Chang's key thesis is more deserving of kudos, however, than are his predictions and assumptions. He correctly identifies much of the economic swamp that the country is mired in: debt-laden banks and broken state firms. Unconvincing, however, is his argument that the Chinese Communist Party will soon collapse—possibly within five years—and the country will face enormous upheaval. As a lover of liberty and justice, Chang perhaps is influenced by his hopes when he argues that the collapse of the Party is a step that necessarily follows the people's dissatisfaction with the government over such issues as the standoff with Taiwan, the corrupt political system, or shaky banks and falling stocks. His book maintains that the country's many woes may add up to a terminal illness, and has become a best-seller by satisfying people's curiosity by offering a precise answer to the question of when

²In his classic essay, Adam Przeworski pointed out that the lack of a feasible alternative is an important factor for the continuation of authoritarian rule. See Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Guillermo O'Donnell et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 47-63.



and where China will begin to collapse. As the following analysis suggests, however, while the level of discontent in China is—in some places and on some topics—very high, dissatisfaction is nowhere near acute enough to throw the existing regime off its perch.

Political upheaval naturally begins with dissatisfaction, yet any mass civil unrest or protest movements cannot be explained simply by intense popular discontent. Despite predicting the year and circumstances of counterrevolution, Chang fails to spell out the political mechanisms and social foundations prerequisite for countrywide unrest in modern China. The 1989 Tiananmen movement illustrates the trigger effect of fracturing Party unity. The evident disintegration of the Party's cohesion in early May of that year was the most important determinant of the size and drive of the protest movement. A split among the leadership drove significant portions of the party-state apparatus, especially key organizations in the mass media, to openly support the student campaign. The media's detailed and sympathetic reporting—albeit only for several days in mid-May—triggered a groundswell of popular support for the student demonstrations, and then effectively mobilized white- and blue-collar workers, professionals, and cadres willing to march under banners that proudly named their workplaces. The most important lesson the Party learned from the 1989 upheaval was to maintain party unity and prevent any evident division in the national leadership. Among this leadership, interests are to be shared and any defection is to be met with severe consequences.

The national leadership is not alone in fearing social disorder. From the perspective of society itself, national character and mass psychology mean that the population in general is hypersensitive to civil protests and movements—even those that are functional and therefore healthy. *The absence of a revolutionary mood among the public may in fact be what prevents the coming collapse of China.* While most Chinese indeed do not like the Communist Party, they fear even more the possibility of its collapse. There is no real market for democracy among the urban middle classes and the intellectuals, who are supposed to be the driving force for political reform. Decent and reflective intellectuals, swayed by the Party's skillful propaganda, bear in mind the parlous state of the former Soviet

Union and the misfortunes occurring in Asian countries that have embraced political liberalization. The "haves" in the booming coastal cities do not like the corrupt and dictatorial Communist Party, but this unhappiness may not be so great as to lead them to push for political participation or reform. In addition, the urban well-to-do do not care so much about their rural counterparts, the "have-nots"; important only is that urban comfort and prosperity remain unchanged.

In the jobless northeast and poor inland countryside, popular disaffection is not wanting. Popular leaders and effective institutions are, however, necessary to organize any sustainable and cross-regional protests that could cause widespread social upheaval. True, China lacks effective institutions to save its broken state firms and profitless farmlands, but even more certain is that Chinese society lacks independent labor, peasant, or civilian organizations to organize or sustain a cross-regional movement on their own. Despite labor and peasant protests that frequently break out throughout the nation, Beijing has managed to placate the protesters—with either payoffs on the one hand or the use of intimidating force on the other—and thus isolate the problem at a controllable local level.

Chang's main thesis, however, should be taken seriously. Following China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), China's yet-to-be-modernized command capitalism is becoming more firmly tied to a massively corrupt political system and morally decaying society. Chang might be proven right—if sometime in the future elite strife in the national leadership is combined with superbly organized civilian demonstrations/movements in China's cities or countryside.

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