



China Perspectives

2007/3 | 2007

Creating a Harmonious Society

Democratic Debate is no Longer Stifle

Compiled and commented Analysis

Michal Meidan



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2303>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.2303

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 septembre 2007

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

Michal Meidan, « Democratic Debate is no Longer Stifle », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2007/3 | 2007, mis en ligne le 09 avril 2008, consulté le 14 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2303>

China Analysis

Les Nouvelles de Chine

This section, prepared by the Asia Centre (www.centreasia.org), draws mainly on the press in Chinese, aiming to reflect the point of view of the People's Republic of China on international questions and issues related to Greater China.

Democratic Debate is no Longer Stifled

Compiled and commented by Michal Meidan based on:

- Xie Tao, ⁽¹⁾ "The democratic socialist model and the future of China," *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, no. 2, February 2007.
- Wu Min, "Without democracy, there is no Communist Party," *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, no. 3, March 2007.
- Jiang Xun, "Democracy is making slow progress but taking its first steps in China," *Yazhou Zhoukan*, 10 June.
- Shen Baoxiang, "Socialism with Chinese characteristics is our banner," *Xuexi Shibao*, 18 July 2007.

Between March and April 2007, the journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (China across the ages) published a series of articles calling for the pursuit of democratic reform and the liberalisation of the press. Founded in 1993, the journal is backed by Party elders who adopt rather reform-minded positions but whose career paths have all passed through the official press organs.

The series of articles has reportedly provoked a feverish debate at the heart of the political leadership, ⁽²⁾ but no official condemnation or reaction was issued against the authors or the journal itself, and it has not seemed to suffer from publishing the articles, according to its editor-in-chief Du Daozheng. Nevertheless, the second issue, dating from February was noticeable by its absence on the journal's website... By calling for the establishment of democratic socialism in China, following the example of the political systems of northern Europe, the article by Xie Tao was the most audacious in its aims. "The reform of the political system can no longer be deferred," he writes, "only a constitutional democracy can solve the problems of corruption that have affected the ruling Party, and only democratic socialism can save China." He continues his argument by maintaining that the history of the twenty-first century has been marked by a competition between three political systems: capitalism, communism and Swedish-style democratic socialism. Democratic socialism has, according to him, triumphed over the others. It has, furthermore, transformed both communism and capitalism. Thus, to pursue economic reforms under a Maoist system can only lead China into a disastrous bureaucratic capitalism, comparable to the failed experiences of the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China.

Moreover, Xie Tao believes that Marx and Engels, towards the end of their lives, adhered to the idea of democratic socialism, thus abandoning the violent revolution described in their *Communist Manifesto*.

The article by Wu Min is, in this context, less daring in its recommendations. While its title seems provocative, its intentions are rapidly cloaked in a more politically correct rhetoric. While predicting that the Communist Party cannot last without democracy, he nevertheless deems that it has endured up to now because it fundamentally encompasses the notion of democracy and embodies the aspirations of the people to become their own masters. He traces the presence of this democratic notion in the Communist Party back to the speeches given by Mao Zedong in the 1940s and to the texts relating to the founding of the People's Republic of China. The creation of a communist party would not have been possible without the existence of a democratic discourse in China at this time, he continues, or without an intellectual ferment surrounding the notion of democracy.

In contrast, the Soviet Communist Party failed precisely because of its inability to integrate the goals of liberty and democracy in its discourse as well as in its exercise of power. The goal of the Chinese Communist Party is thus to guide the Chinese population and to sustain it in its effort to become an "association of free individuals," master of the country and of society. Now, only an internal democracy within the Party can guarantee its integrity and its vitality. For intra Party democracy, as stated during the sixteenth

1. Xie Tao is a former vice-president of the prestigious Renmin University in Beijing.

2. "Democracy? Hu Needs It," *The Economist*, 28 June 2007.

Central Committee (CC), would allow to uphold the link between the Party and the people and to overcome, or even eradicate corruption, which “comes from society and affects the party ranks.”

The article by Wu Min is just one in a series of articles published in the last few months on the issue of democratic reform in China, that include, most notably an article by Party researcher Yu Keping entitled “Democracy is a good thing” published in *Xuexi shibao* (*Study Times*, a party organ).⁽³⁾ These articles evoke the importance of democracy (albeit using very vague terms), but warn against its dangers, in particular in the context of the immaturity of the Chinese political system (Yu Keping). Thus, if the debate on democracy has not been suppressed, certain interpretations of democracy are more tolerated than others.⁽⁴⁾

In advocating a Swedish-style system, Xie Tao has clearly gone too far. Without explicitly coming out in favour of a system of multiparty elections, his praise of a Swedish-style social democratic system, coupled with his criticism of a “utopian” communist ideal, sparked a subtle reaction within Chinese intellectual circles. The *People's Daily*, in the vein of Wen Jiabao's speech (declaring that a Western style democratic system would be a dead end for China), published analyses demonstrating that Europe's social democratic systems are incompatible with China's national characteristics. The economic journal *Jingji yanjiu cankao* (Review of Economic Research) also published a special series of articles on political reform consisting of recommendations but maintaining the necessity of the party's monopoly on power.

This debate fuelled some questioning in the Hong Kong press: is the Beijing leadership preparing a new political programme that it will unveil in the autumn? Is it only tolerating this discourse in order to avoid any deterioration of the political climate before the Seventeenth Party Congress? Some analysts believe in fact that, behind closed doors, these ideas are being strongly criticised but that the leaders are holding fire on any reaction that may appear too conservative.

While waiting for the Central Committee, which will meet on 15 October in Beijing, Hu Jintao seems to have given a partial response to this debate. In a speech given on 25 June, the secretary general expressed the official Party line on the subject of the democratic debate. He reiterated the fundamental role of the Party in the leadership of the country in order to guarantee that reform follows “the correct political orientation.” Parliamentary democracy is thus ruled out, but “political participation” should be expanded in an “orderly” fashion. In the analysis of this speech published in

the official journal *Xuexi shibao*, Shen Baoxiang thus puts the emphasis on socialism with Chinese characteristics. “In China, we cannot take the capitalist path,” he says, “in the contemporary world there are several forms of socialism that we have to study and evaluate in a calm and objective manner. When the time is right, lessons will have to be drawn, but we cannot adopt another form of socialism.” •

3. And reprinted on the *People's Daily* website at <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49150/49152/5224247.html>.

4. For another official interpretation, see the previous issue of *China Analysis*.