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China's Long March to Freedom

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Abstract

Yang highlights several factors that augur well for freedom in China. These factors include growing elite discourse on human rights and democracy as well as a massive expansion of tertiary education that will make a new generation more capable of articulating its interests. International factors include the expansion of democracy in Asia and China's aspirations to be a responsible global power in a world in which the leading powers are democracies. Ultimately China's political transformation will not be determined by the top elite alone but will be subject to negotiation and contestation among diverse interests.

Comment

CHINA'S LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM

Dali L. Yang

Dali L. Yang, previously the chairman of the department of political science at the University of Chicago, is now the director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China (2004).

A little over a decade ago, Henry Rowen published his essay, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," and predicted that China would become a democracy around the year 2015.¹ Drawing on the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Rowen noted that China's economic growth was accompanied by positive changes which were enabling freedom to expand. He predicted the further deepening, expansion, and maturation of grassroots democracy (especially village elections); substantial progress toward the rule of law; and greater freedom for the mass media. Such developments would prepare the ground for China to follow in the footsteps of many democratized countries.

Rowen has now taken renewed stock of China's ongoing transformation, as well as advances in the study of democratization. He has returned with essentially the same argument, though more nuanced. China has already enjoyed remarkable economic growth, and if it can reasonably sustain this robust growth, the country will become more free. Rather than simply predicting that democracy will take hold in China by 2015, however, Rowen's forecast is now more modulated: In the framework of the Freedom House rankings, China will likely be Partly Free by 2015 and Free by 2025.

Rowen's forecast rests on a simple but powerful statistical observation: Non-oil-dominated countries that reach a certain level of Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPpc)—namely, a level of \$8,000 per annum, as converted to 2005 U.S. dollars at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rates—have invariably become freer and are rated at least Partly Free. China, Rowen suggests, will be no exception. The

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