

China's Democratic Future? Lessons from Britain during the Long Eighteenth Century

by Michael T. Davis

Here is one of the most intriguing questions of our time—what is China's political destiny? For some, the answer seems self-evident: world domination. Martin Jacques and many other China-watchers say it is not 'if' but 'when China rules the world.'¹ But the burning question is, how will China rule itself? How will it survive as a stable and centralized state through its economic and global make-over as a superpower? What will the political future of this vast and rapidly evolving nation look like?

Perhaps the answers to these questions can be found in another time and place: in Britain during the so-called 'long 18th century' (1688–1832), where we can see parallels between the forces that helped transform Britain into the global superpower of the 19th century and those that underpin China's modern-day transformation. As a result of the agents of change that took place during the long 18th century, Britain laid the foundations for the progressive democratization of British society, especially after the Great Reform Act of 1832.² Interestingly, one of the discussion points about China is whether or not the nation and its people will be put on the path of democracy. Many Western observers inappropriately approach this topic, one way or another, with a normative stance that places Western-style democracy as the highest form of political evolution. But to argue that China will have a democratic future should not imply any level of Western superiority. In fact, it is reasonable to accept that 'democracy with Chinese characteristics' will

continue to unfold into reality, just as democracy in its own distinctive ways emerged in Russia and Japan.³

It is also important to acknowledge that we are comparing diversely distinct countries in different historical periods. Britain during the long 18th century and modern-day China are socially, politically, and culturally unique. However, despite these dissimilarities, the comparison is not lost for at least some Chinese. Li Daokui, Professor of Economics at Tsinghua University and former adviser to China's central bank, is reported as saying: "We want to learn from the British model... Today's leaders in China are looking carefully at the British style of political change over the last 400 years."⁴ For Li, Britain during the 18th century provides a map for charting the waters of reform and avoiding the hazards of revolution. Just as the forces of change in 18th-century Britain paved the way for democracy, so too will those similar agencies help determine and shape the political future of China. As Jacques notes: "In the long run it seems rather unlikely, given the underlying pressures for democracy that exist within increasingly sophisticated, diverse and prosperous societies, that China will be able to resist the process of democratization."⁵

This process will undoubtedly be a significant turning point in the sweeping narrative of Chinese history, in which China is seen as having no democratic heritage from its foundation some 5,000 years ago to the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.

It is true that the country's dynastic political traditions were underpinned by notions of state sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty, but this political template cannot be entirely superimposed on China's past and its Confucian foundations. While Confucianism can support an authoritarian government, it also has aspects that could cushion democratic ideas. Sun Yat-sen—the leader of the 1911 overthrow of the Qing Dynasty—looked back to the ancient Confucian philosopher, Mencius as "the ancestor of our democratic ideas."⁶ This is an important reflection given the renaissance of Confucianism and decline of Marxism in contemporary China.⁶

But it might be argued that Britain in the long 18th century—unlike modern-day China—at least had some semblance of grassroots democratic practices, not just philosophical musings. While democracy was not a word used for most of the 18th century, by the mid-19th century it was an expectation for many. The right to vote in 18-century Britain was one based upon property qualifications, which meant only about 10 percent of the adult population had the franchise. However, the common people—those who did not meet the property requirements to cast a vote at an election—can still be seen as active citizens. Elections "were an opportunity for the populace to turn the world upside down, if only for a short period" and crowd actions like election riots were integral to Hanoverian politics, forming "a vital part of the legitimacy of the electoral process."⁷ We also

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find actual democratic practices in the 18th century that would have given some people a familiarity with democracy. The London members of the livery companies, which were basically trade guilds, elected the City's four members of Parliament and nominated candidates for Lord Mayor and Sheriff.⁸ The working classes also had their own taste of democracy when the London Corresponding Society (LCS) was formed in 1792. The Society was Britain's first truly working class political club and its primary objective was electoral reform, including an extension of the franchise. Importantly, the LCS had its own internal system of democracy that "anticipated the reformed constitutional government they advocated" and "demonstrated that members of the LCS—those tradesmen, mechanics and shopkeepers excluded from the British polity—had the faculties and propensities for active citizenship and political virtue."⁹

These experiences of democracy—however illusory or tenuous—would have whetted the political appetites of Britons. Interestingly, there have also been tokens of democracy in China that have given the masses a taste for enfranchisement. We can look as far back as February 1913, when China held its first (and only) national election after the fall of the Qing Dynasty. Following victory at this election of the *Kuomintang*, a party founded by Sun Yat-sen and Song Jiaoren, provincial elections became so common that the Republican period has been described as "politically more democratic than many comparable regimes in Europe at the time," and by 1944, some Western observers looked to China as the "nation which will carry the light of democracy to the millions of East Asia."¹⁰ More recently, democratization has occurred through



James Gillray (1975)

"Copenhagen House"—Calls for democracy in Britain during the 1790s

elected villagers' committees in provincial China. These elections have been contested by multiple candidates, with ballots held in secret and on the basis of one person, one vote. And it is democratization on a grand scale, with much of China's largest sector of the population—villagers—now familiar with the practice of democracy and Chinese leaders pointing to the village elections as an outward commitment to democratization.^{11,12,13}

Irrespective of any Western cynicism or criticism of Communist visions for democracy in China, it seems apparent the leaders of China know that an expansion of political rights is an inevitable and even a desirable eventuality. The historical forces that once helped shape the long 18th century in Britain are also present in modern-day China and are forces that cannot be ignored or resisted.

One of the main markers of both 18th-century Britain and modern China is the shift away from subsistence

agriculture and the development of an industrial economy. Economists who follow Rostow's model of economic growth, would identify both countries in their respective historical periods as moving through the stage of 'take-off' to a 'drive to maturity.'¹⁴ And these are moves of resounding proportions and uncanny parallels. Britain moved from a predominantly agrarian society to become the world's industrial powerhouse as the 18th century progressed into the 19th century. Today, China has been remodelled in a similar way, shifting from an agricultural backwater to a booming industrial giant. Just as some historians question if Britain underwent an industrial 'revolution' or industrial 'evolution,'¹⁵ we can also point to China's industrial growth as a process that evolved over the last four decades since Deng Xiaoping initiated a series of economic reforms that captured the Chinese desire to modernize.¹⁶ With its seemingly unlimited supply of cheap labor, China is now

the world leader in many areas of manufacturing and the label ‘made in China’—whether applied pejoratively or not—is a phrase that captures the dominant reality of the present and the future.

Industrialization in both countries was underpinned by almost insatiable demands for natural resources. After James Watt patented a steam engine in 1781, steam became the moving force behind the increasing number of factories in Britain. With steam engines needing heated water from coal-fuelled fires, coal mines were barely able to keep up with the demand from British industries during the long 18th century. But China has taken this consumption to another level, with its use of fossil fuels about four times that of the world’s second largest user, the United States. According to a report from the United Nations Environment Program, “China’s dramatic economic growth over the past few decades has increased demands for natural resources within and beyond the country in ways that are unprecedented in human history.”¹⁷ Not surprisingly, environmental degradation is one of the most significant problems that is symptomatic of industrialization. Historians generally acknowledge that the Industrial Revolution in Britain was one of the negative turning points in environmental history and was the beginning for some of the key issues we face today, such as water and air pollution.^{18,19} By the end of the long 18th century, the environmental conditions in Britain’s cities were horrendous: “And what cities! It was not merely that smoke hung over them and filth impregnated them, that the elementary public services - water-supply, sanitation, street-cleaning, open spaces etc—could not keep pace with the mass migration of men into the cities.”²⁰ This could be a description of many cities in modern-day

China, where waste management is often unable to cope with the growth in urban population and where air pollution is implicated in significant loss of life expectancy.^{21,22} Worryingly, it is not just China’s urban population that faces the dangers from environmental damage. Some small rural communities near polluting factories have even been dubbed ‘cancer villages’ due to the extraordinarily high rates of cancer among their residents.²³

More recently, democratization has occurred through elected villagers’ committees in provincial China.

As concerns about the environment and other social issues increase among the Chinese population, there is a growing awareness of the power to protest against government decisions. Despite the immense forces of law and order to deal with protests at the disposal of the Chinese Communist Party, there have been instances of popular resistance winning concessions from the government. In July 2012, thousands of residents in Qidong took to the streets to protest against an industrial waste pipeline project that they feared would pollute the city’s water—and they won.²⁴ But, just as in 18th-century Britain, there are far more protests in China that lose rather than win. But popular unrest is a barometer to measure the level of grassroots pressure in a society as well as to witness the critical discontent among the common people to their government’s practices. The 18th century in Britain can be properly described as “an age of riot”²⁵—it seemed that nearly everyone in Britain was protesting against just about everything and the same reflection is true of modern-day China. In fact, China experiences far more protests than is

generally recognized, and these demonstrations are motivated by concerns that range from the environment and social problems to religion and political justice. China is experiencing its own ‘age of riot’, in which “socially motivated urban and rural protests have steadily increased in frequency, expanded in size, diversified in terms of their participants’ backgrounds, enlarged in geographical coverage, last longer and displayed higher levels of violence.”²⁵

One key area of contention common to both urban and rural Chinese in recent years has been domestic land grabbing to continue the nation’s economic and industrial leaps. Under the pursuit of development, domestic land expropriation in China has become one of the defining features of industrialization and urbanization.^{26,27} This is particularly true in provincial China, where vast tracts of land are being seized by local authorities driven by the revenue imperative. Peasants are often given insufficient compensation while significant profits are reaped by local governments from commercial and industrial developments. This is a somewhat familiar story in the pages of British history. Between 1750 and 1830, common lands were privatized to enhance agricultural productivity under more than 4000 Enclosure Acts passed by the British Parliament. With approximately 6.8 million acres of land across England alone subjected to enclosure, there was extensive displacement of peasants from rural areas into the industrial cities.²⁸ This

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Guo, X (2014)

A peasant in a village in Henan province surrounded by building rubble of houses that had been demolished for a commercial development.

experience often stirred discontent among the peasantry and rural protests became a familiar way of pushing back against the government.²⁹ And there are some strikingly similar protests going on in China today, all of which have the Chinese Communist Party worried about the potential for revolt by dispossessed peasants.³⁰

Interestingly, recent research has shown that Chinese citizens tend to express the highest levels of satisfaction with the central government and are least content with local authorities.³¹ This is far from surprising given the 'local' world view that many villagers still maintain and their protests

are to a certain extent de-politicized. In one Henan village, a local peasant whom I met in February 2014 has seen most of his village reduced to rubble during the previous year to make way for a new commercial development. In protest against the sum of compensation being offered to him, he remains defiantly in the house he called home for the previous 15 years. When asked if he cared about politics, the answer was a resounding 'no'.

Yet—perhaps without knowing it—this peasant is asserting his political rights against what is seen as the arbitrary powers of authority, in a way similar to that exerted by

the common people in Britain during the long 18th century. However, social unrest is unlikely to ripen into a sustained political movement unless connections between disaffected individuals and groups are forged. Urbanization—that dominant, enduring symbol of both British and Chinese industrialization—plays a pivotal role in crystallizing discontents. By the time the long 18th century was drawing to a close, about 40% of Britain's population was living in urban areas and London was the world's largest city with a population of around 1.5 million.³² China is now taking what Britain did 200 years ago to a whole



Gustav Doré (1870)

“Over London by Rail”—An impression of the crowded and polluted cities of industrial Britain, indicative of the large scale urbanization of the time period.

new level, at a much faster pace and on a much larger scale. Historically, familiarity with urban life has deep roots in China’s past - stretching back to the great ancient cities of Kaifeng and Luoyang and the flourishing capitals of Beijing and Nanjing during the Ming dynasty.³³ But for the first time in Chinese history, it was announced that the majority of its population lived in cities rather than rural areas in 2012—about 690 million people who are now considered to be city dwellers.³⁴ In the long 18th century, the essence of urbanization was the townscapes of

London and the northern industrial cities like Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. Today, China has redefined the essence of urbanization with extraordinary urban developments, from ‘ghost cities’ such as Dongguan and Tianducheng to the booming metropolises of Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou.

We know that British urbanization went hand in hand with economic growth as the domestic economy quadrupled over the course of the long 18th century.³⁵ Although the impoverished megacities of Latin

America are proof that urbanization and economic expansion are not necessarily complementary, China envisages its cities will be the drivers behind dominating the global economy. But, just as urbanization brought significant social challenges to the British in the long 18th century, so too will the Chinese be faced with increasingly difficult issues to address such as urban housing, sanitation, pollution and public health. Amidst these challenges will emerge a political opportunity that will foster calls for political reform. Cities bring people

together, to discuss, to congregate and to share common interests. The long 18th century was an ‘associational world’, where people joined clubs and societies that catered for their tastes whether it was bee-keeping or religion, science or politics.^{36,37} Importantly, political reform societies like the LCS were made viable in part because they could attract sufficient members from the expanding city populations. They also benefited from improved communications and transport during the long 18th century. Better roads, a more efficient postal system and expansion of the press were all features of Britain at this time, and they were features that political groups used to connect with like-minded citizens and distribute ideas of democracy.

If such a connection of like-minded citizens is to take place anywhere in the world today, it is China that has the platform laid. Superfast trains and impressive highway systems are bringing people together more easily. There is also the rapid increase in private car ownership in the last two decades in China, transforming it from the so-called ‘country of bikes’ to a nation with more than 51 million automobile drivers.³⁸ The environmental impact of this huge rise in car ownership is well accounted but the potential political implications are not as immediately recognizable. The building of roads and the driving of cars is not a phenomenon confined just to the cities—everywhere in China is experiencing this transport revolution. In rural areas, it once could take days to traipse from one village to the next. Today, the transport revolution is creating a communications revolution as one-time isolated villages and villagers are now able to connect and communicate more efficiently. Importantly, Chinese youth are better informed and able to

communicate with each other faster than ever before, with the widespread use of mobile phones, the internet and social media facilitating an unprecedented level of connectedness in China.

As the communications revolution in all its facets continues to unfold in China, one of the most important facilitators of political change will be fostered: the spread of ideas. In the 18th century, the ideas of freedom that came out of America following independence in 1783 and the concepts of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ that emanated from the French Revolution then travelled to Britain and beyond.³⁹

Urbanization—that dominant, enduring symbol of both British and Chinese industrialization—plays a pivotal role in crystallizing discontents.

The global entanglement of the period made the spread of ideas impossible to control. But the British government tried. It recognized that the scattering of ideas was often a greater threat to the status quo than those who created the ideas, and so it went about prosecuting the booksellers and printers of radical writers. Ironically, in trying to stamp out the circulation of radical thoughts, prosecution tended to highlight and promote the very ideas that the government tried to suppress.⁴⁰ China will inevitably face a similar challenge from ideas critical of government practices. Although the 21st century is earmarked as the ‘Asia Century’ and China is at the helm, the economic future of the Chinese will be inextricably linked to the West—a contemporary global entanglement that will encourage popular interest in Western ideas. Into this net must

be added the many Chinese tourists who travel overseas as well as the huge numbers who study abroad. Research has shown that Chinese students studying in the West actually change their practices as they inherit Western learning cultures.⁴¹ Similarly, some of those Chinese will return home infused with notions of political rights and freedoms.

But notions will only go so far towards making a change and time remains the greatest of all transformative forces. It took the long 18th century for the making a politically-conscious working class in Britain, as told in the seminal

work of E.P. Thompson.⁴² Slowly but progressively they became aware of their rights, expressed their discontents and in the end they won. As China moves away from its peasant past to its urban working-class and middle-class future, we will also witness the making of political consciousness. The structural changes to China’s society that accompany industrialization and urbanization will result in the disappearance of the once dominant world of the peasant. As that world vanishes from view, there will not only be a loss of villages but also ‘village mentalities’. More and more Chinese will have the capacity to devote the time once spent on subsistence and survival to issues beyond the local, such as the environment and politics. This new cultural mindset will be an evolution—just as economic

maturity can take 50 to 100 years, so too will political maturity. It will take generations; but even the current generation of Chinese youth are showing a fresh, open-eyed view of the future.⁴³ You can see in some of China's airports the high-end Western fashion stores, which are obviously catering for more than just international visitors. You can see in the clothes and latest electronic gadgetry owned by some Chinese youth their middle-class attainments or at least their aspirations to be socially mobile. But will economic freedom and upward mobility be enough for this generation and those that follow? Or, will they be like the English working classes of the long 18th century and demand more of a say in the political present and future of their nation? Perhaps this is a dream but Xi Jinping is basing China's future around the so-called 'Chinese Dream', an ideology intended to rejuvenate the nation and improve the livelihoods of people. Xi wants Chinese youth "to dare to dream, work assiduously to fulfill the dreams and contribute to the revitalization of the nation."⁴⁴ Some are dreaming of democracy but will that dream become a reality? The lessons from Britain in the long 18th century tell us it will but only time will tell. **S**

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