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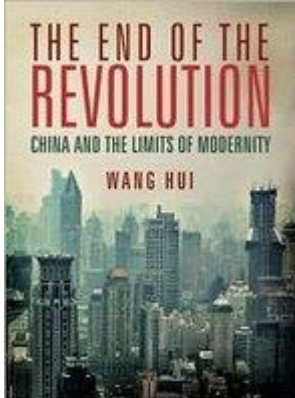
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## The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity

March 22, 2010 in [Excerpt](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [4 comments](#)



When the [Association for Asian Studies](#) meets in Philadelphia later this week, one of the keynote speakers will be Tsinghua University professor and noted public intellectual Wang Hui, whose [talk on Saturday evening](#) is free and open to the public. A former editor of Dushu ("Reading"), Wang's writings include [China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition](#) (Harvard, 2003), as well as a recently released collection of essays, [The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity](#) (Verso, 2009). Here, we are pleased to share with China Beat readers an excerpt from the English edition introduction of *The End of the Revolution*.

### **The paradox of the statification of the party**

Discussions of the state are directly related to questions about the formation of democratic mechanisms. There is one basic paradox one must face, which is that, on the one hand, China's ability to govern effectively has been widely acknowledged in comparison with the governments of many other countries, from its disaster relief mobilization after the May 12 Wenchuan earthquake to its rapid response in initiating a bailout plan after the financial meltdown, and from its successful management of the Olympic Games to the efficacy of its various local governments in organizational development and controlling the crisis. But on the other hand, contradictions have appeared between officials and the people in certain areas, and have become sharp at certain times, with the administrative abilities and levels of honesty of different levels of government having come into question. The key issue is that such contradictions are often blown up into large-scale and widely debated legitimacy crises. By observing the situation in other countries, we can see that an institutional political crisis may not result even if the capacity of the state declines, the government accomplishes nothing, the economy is in recession and social policies remain unimplemented. This issue is closely connected with democracy as the source of political legitimacy.

In the 1980s, the democratic question was fairly simple. The wave of democratization had been building over twenty years, and on the one hand, democracy remained the most important source of political legitimacy. But on the other hand, the method of simply imitating Western democracy had lost the attraction it had possessed in Asia in the 1980s. In the wake of the crises in the emerging democracies and the fading of the "color revolutions" after 1989, the tendency toward democratization began to decline in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and other regions. At the same time, the formation of a democratic cavity in the democratic nations of Western society and in the Third World (for instance India) is creating a universal democratic crisis, one closely connected to the conditions of marketization and globalization. For one, the dominant forms of the post-war political democracies were multi-party or two-party parliamentary systems, but under market conditions, political parties are becoming less representative each day than they were in the early days of democracy. In the drive to attract votes, the political values of the parties are gradually becoming obscured, so that the representative system of democracy exists now in name only. Second, the connection between democracy and states is also being threatened under the condition of globalization: as economic relations gradually exceed the traditional categorizations of national economies, and as its related activities become difficult to balance within the confines of a single country, the political plans of any country are forced to adjust to the international system. Third, in some countries, the shift toward

oligarchical forms and the consolidation of special interests in political parties has resulted in the gradual disconnection of democracy as a political structure from the basic units of society. The interests and needs of the lower strata find no expression within the political sphere. As a result, they resort to a self-defensive anarchy (i.e. the rise of Maoism in India). Fourth, the reliance of the election process on large amounts of money and financial resources has resulted in the existence of both legal and illegal forms of election fraud in many democratic countries, thus destroying public confidence in the election process. This is not to say that democratic values are dead. The real question is what kind of democracy do we need and what form should it take. How do we make democracy something more than an empty form, into something with substantive meaning?

The Chinese political system has also undergone significant transformations, including a change in the role of the party. In the 1980s, the primary goal of political reform was the separation of the party from the state, but after the 1990s, this grew out of favor as a popular slogan, so that the government and party intersected more frequently in concrete practice and institutional arrangements. I interpret this phenomenon to be part of the shift toward party stratification, and it is worth analyzing why this tendency arose. According to traditional political theories, the party represents the will of the people—through parliamentary struggles and debates, or through procedural democracy—to become state and public will, and even the expression of sovereignty. In China, the multiparty cooperation system, under which eight other democratic parties are led by the ruling Communist Party and are also involved in state affairs, is built upon multi-party representation. But under market society conditions, state apparatuses are directly involved in economic activity, and the various branches of the state become entangled with special interests. This infiltration of the state by the party is not a new phenomenon — the primary issue faced during Mao Zedong’s time was not simply the bureaucratization of the state but also the bureaucratization of the party — but its intense permeation of the state under market society conditions is new. What was called the “neutral state” in the early years of reform is now undergoing a transformation. Because the party remains relatively disconnected from economic activity, it is able to express the will of society with relative independence and “neutrality.” The weeding out of corruption, for instance, is largely reliant upon effective implementation by party mechanisms. After the 1990s, the will of the state was presented primarily through the goals and slogans of the party, including the “Three Represents,” the “Harmonious Society” and the “Scientific Outlook on Development,” but these were no longer direct and special expressions of the party but instead directly invoked the interests of the entire people. In this sense, the party has become the core of public sovereignty.

However, the stratification of the party also involves a dual challenge. For one, if the division between the party and the state vanishes entirely, then what forces or mechanisms can prevent the party from becoming trapped within the relations of interest of market society, as the state has? Second, the universal representation of the traditional party (and the “neutrality” of the early socialist state) was built on its clear political values. The stratification of the party will mean a weakening and transformation of the party’s political values, so that if the achievement of a “neutral state” is closely connected to the political values of the party, then what apparatuses can enable China to maintain its broad representation of interests under these new conditions? What force can the party rely upon for self renewal, and how might the voices of the common people find expression in the public sphere? What is required to initiate change in the basic lines and policies of the state and party, through true freedom of speech, venues of negotiation and continuous interaction between officials and the people? How can we attract and consolidate international and domestic forces on a wide scale to achieve the most widespread democracy? These questions cannot be avoided in discussing the self-renewal of the party.

These are also questions we need to consider in thinking about China’s political transformation, alongside the question of China’s democratic road. Specifically, I think there are at least three aspects we need to consider. First, China experienced a long and profound revolution in the twentieth century, so that Chinese society retains an acute sensitivity toward the demands of fairness and social equality. How should these historical and political traditions be translated into democratic demands under contemporary conditions? In other words, what is the mass line or the popular democracy of this new era? Second, the Chinese Communist Party is massive and has experienced significant changes, becoming more entangled with state apparatuses with each day. How can this party system become more democratic, and how can the state’s ability to represent the universal interest be preserved

while the role of the party is being transformed? Third, how can a new political form be constructed upon the social base, granting greater political capacity to mass society and thereby overcoming the condition of "depoliticization" created through neoliberalism's marketization? These questions have bred further important, theoretical lines of inquiry, including: under conditions of globalization of marketization, in what political direction will the PRC move towards? How can a dialectic of increased self-reliance and increased opening up be forged in Chinese society? This "self-reliance" does not refer to nationalistic or ethnocentric tendencies but rather the reestablishment of values and politics along different lines—if anything, it is a new internationalism. The global significance of this exploration should be obvious given the universal crisis of democracy and market.

The 1990s are over. This post-1989 process has shown signs in the past few years that it has already reached its end, but the year 2008 has provided the clearest signs of all. Globally, neoliberalism's economic path has been hit by a massive crisis, while in China this became evident through a series of events: from the March 14 Tibet Incident to the Wenchuan earthquake, from the Beijing Olympics to the financial crisis, Chinese society has come to understand its own global position in a different way. In Western societies, discussions regarding China's rise have been conducted for quite some time, but amid the crisis, people suddenly realized that China was an economy to be reckoned with, second only to the US. Its rise has occurred more quickly than had been predicted, expressed in a corresponding level of self-confidence. This change was dramatic and some of its elements were coincidental, though not accidental. The issue may be that China is still scrambling to adjust to its new international identity. The contradictions that have accumulated in Chinese society during the process of marketization and the dangers it now faces as a result of globalization are both unprecedented. Whether we are talking about the so-called "end of the 90s" or analyzing the "end of the revolution," the real goal is to clarify the situation we face, and to question and to formulate a new politics, a new path in a new direction. This "end" is not an end in the Hegelian sense but rather the will to break with the past and the desire to construct a new politics. It is from here that we must look back upon the revolutionary inheritance of the twentieth century.

**Tags:** [Wang Hui](#)