

# Chinese Rebellions

by  
Mr. Ian Buruma

**Ian Buruma:** Since this is a rather intimate gathering, with your permission I'll be a little less formal and talk to you from the table and not stand up there at the pulpit like a preacher. China is a slightly non-topic at the moment. If we'd been sitting here two years ago, we would probably be fretting about the coming war with China or the coming collapse of China or the coming something of China, but at least we'd be fretting. Now we're fretting about other things.

## Stability in China

Nonetheless, China now is a valued member of the coalition, is still being discussed here and there, and in increasingly positive terms, which is a change from before. China is being contrasted with India as a kind of success story. India is seen as at least economically a disaster and the Chinese appear to be forging ahead more and more. China is thought to be by many businessmen who flocked to invest there, diplomats who are based there and commentators outside China as a place that is basically stable.

The people who believe that also usually believe that the reason for its seeming stability is that it has a party, one party in the government that is still firmly in control of things. They would argue, and one hears this argument often, that the Chinese or China is too big, too diverse, too backward in education and so on, to be able to handle a different kind of system yet, and that some form of authoritarianism is necessary because otherwise you wouldn't have the stability that we have today. We'd have chaos, people would mayhem in the streets, people wouldn't know how to handle it, they would be at each other's throats, and so on and so forth.

## China's Confucian Past

One of the arguments for this view is that authoritarianism in one form or another suits the Chinese tradition. That historically they've always had strong authoritarian central governments, and the Confucian system is often invoked, and that this fits the way of governing things in China. And that anything else is a sort of alien imposition and one would be an arrogant Western neo-colonialist to think that a more open democratic system would be equally or perhaps more suitable.

The assumptions behind this view of Chinese politics are several. I'm interested in these assumptions and that's part of the reason I wrote this book, *Bad Elements*. One of the assumptions is that politics follow or reflect a kind of monolithic culture, that you have a cultural tradition in a particular area of the world and therefore the politics should be read as a kind of reflection of that tradition, of that culture, that the culture produces a particular set of political institutions. Since China is not Britain, it's logical that it would have produced a different way of governing the nation.

This idea that politics reflects culture is of course also a Chinese one, and I would argue it's one of the problems with China. It's not China alone, but all countries with a Confucian past tend to have this, but China in particular. Namely the idea that the government in power, and this was true of imperial China just as much as it is today under the Communist Party. The assumption is that the government is not simply there to wield temporal political power, to govern political institutions, but it's also the source, the guardian perhaps, of Chinese tradition, of spiritual life, of ethics and so on. The Mandarinate are the

kind of scribes, the scholar-gentlemen or the scribes — used to be, the scribes to define and promote and articulate the ethics and the spiritual background of Chinese culture that is reflected in the government.

In other words, there is a kind of cosmic idea of politics which goes back centuries. The idea, namely, that the people who rule China are not simply politicians or officials, they are — as the emperors were — literally people who mediate between heaven and earth. It's a system where ethics and politics and culture and so on are all bound up together. So in a way, church and state in China have never really been separated.

Since governments, and I think in this way the communist government really isn't so different from imperial governments, even though in other ways it's very different, but since governments to this day set themselves up as the guardians of what it is to be China, of an idea of China, of Chinese civilization as a whole, it's very easy for them to depict dissidents and those who challenge their power and who rebel as anti-Chinese. They're not just anti-government, by being against the government they're against China. So it's suggested quite deliberately by the government, since the government justifies its power by being the guardian of civilization.

This also bedevils, I think, a lot of the rebels themselves, because a lot of the dissidents and rebels against the governments of the day see themselves not simply as rebels against a particular set of political arrangements, they see themselves often as saviors of Chinese civilization, who have to change not only the politics but also the ethics and the spiritual life and the whole caboodle. It has to be — a revolution is often almost of a cosmic nature. It's not just politics that has to be changed but everything that is associated with it. So to be a rebel in China is not simply to be a political rebel, it's often to be a kind of savior of Chinese civilization.

## Myth of "One China"

One of the reasons in this book that I looked not just at the People's Republic of China but that I looked at the whole Chinese-speaking world, including Taiwan and Singapore and Hong Kong, was to show what a myth this really is. That there isn't just one China and there isn't just one Chinese tradition, and that indeed even people who come from the same cultural tradition in different historical circumstances can go to completely different political directions. The Taiwanese, the Singaporeans, the Hong Kong Chinese and the Chinese in the PRC are all Chinese, but all these different parts of the Chinese-speaking world have different politics. In other words, this alone is a demonstration, I think, of how careful one should be with drawing direct links between cultural tradition and particular political arrangements.

The country that appears to be in the forefront of this view that authoritarian politics represent particular Chinese values or Chinese civilization is also the smallest of them all, and that is Singapore. Even though the promoters and defenders of the Singapore government, which is, like the Chinese one, a de facto one-party state, don't speak of Chinese values, they speak of Asian values — for very obvious reasons, since the majority of Singaporeans may be ethnically Chinese, but there are still Tamils and Malays and others to consider. So to speak of Chinese values would be a mistake. But in fact, when people talk about Asian values in Singapore, they do mean Chinese values.

I think it is in fact a kind of vulgarized version of Confucianism that they have in mind, and in fact it doesn't bear a great deal of relation to the origins of Confucianism at all. The idea, for example, that it is within the Confucian tradition for people to obey their rulers and not to criticize them and so on, which is often an idea that is promoted in Singapore, couldn't be further from Confucius' own original ideas. He said quite clearly that it was the duty of the

scholar-gentleman to criticize his ruler if he saw the ruler departing from the truth or making mistakes. This is not something that is encouraged in Singapore, of course.

The problem, I think, in Singapore is that many of the people who speak of Chinese tradition or Asian values often have very little idea of what they're talking about. They're often English-educated people who've read a little bit about Chinese culture in English-language books, but often have very little idea. It is a tool, they use it, it is a form of propaganda.

Moreover, I think the generation of Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister whose shadow still hovers over almost every aspect of life and guards the so-called garden state, that I think what he associates with Asian values, namely discipline, authoritarianism, the idea that Asian people are not yet ready for democracy and otherwise you have chaos and so on, is largely derived from the British colonial tradition. It is a kind of translation of British colonial ideas that he imbibed and people of his generation — Mahathir is another example — imbibed in their youth and now call Asian, whereas in fact these are colonial prejudices, which they inherited and twisted.

Nonetheless, the idea that a strong authoritarian government is the only thing that stands between civilization and chaos is something that the People's Action Party government in Singapore has in common, I think, with the Communist Party in China. Indeed, there is something Chinese about that. It's fairly easy to do in Singapore because the idea to give middle-class, ethnically Chinese people the idea that they're surrounded by Malays who at the drop of a hat will run amok and that you need a strong government to keep order, would be deeply appealing to them.

### **Democratic Politics in Taiwan**

What is a little irritating to the Singaporeans, or at least the Singaporeans who uphold this

kind of authoritarianism, is that there is another part of the Chinese world that has of late gone into a very different direction, namely Taiwan. Taiwan is an example of Chinese people actually successfully making the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. I think it's something for which they are insufficiently congratulated. It is profoundly irritating to authoritarians in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world because it disproves their view of what it is to be Chinese, or what it is to rule Chinese people.

I think the reason why Taiwan and also Hong Kong, if they had had the chance, the reason that they've made this successful transition to more democratic politics actually has a lot to do with this idea of China or Chinese politics being not simply politics but a system of ethics and the whole cosmic view of the world. I say this because the Taiwanese dissidents in a sense were liberated from the idea that they had to save China. They weren't interested in saving China.

The dissidents in Taiwan, who were often in exile in the United States or in jail in Taiwan, when they fought the KMT, the Kuomintang, the nationalists who'd come from mainland China to Taiwan in the late 1940s, their goal was not to save China, it was simply to free the so-called native Taiwanese, those whose ancestors had come to Taiwan three hundred years ago, from the authoritarian government of the mainlanders who ran the KMT. So it was the KMT that pretended to stand for Chinese civilization, quite literally.

One of the justifications for KMT rule in Taiwan was that they saw themselves as the true guardians of Chinese culture and Chinese tradition, and the idea was always that the Maoists had smashed Chinese culture and there was this one place where Chinese culture was still being preserved. This was very much politicized and used as a justification for KMT rule and KMT aspirations ultimately to rule the whole of China. None of this interested the Taiwanese dissidents particularly. For

them to be branded as anti-Chinese, which they sometimes were by the KMT, didn't bother them at all. In fact, being anti-Chinese for them was in some ways an advantage.

Another way in which this manifested itself was the fact that they would often use their history as a former Japanese colony against the pretensions of the mainlanders who'd come over from China and pretended to stand for the Chinese culture. When I went around interviewing a lot of these people, who are now in their sixties and seventies usually and speak perfect Japanese still, one thing that was – in fact, Taiwan is perhaps the one country of Japanophiles in Asia, which is quite unusual.

### **Rosy-Tinted Version of Colonial History**

What was so interesting and striking is how often they would give me a completely rosy-tinted version of Japanese colonial history. They would say very often, unprompted, how much better life had been under the Japanese, they at least had an idea of order and fair play and the rule of law. Yes, they were harsh and Taiwanese were second-class citizens, but at least it was a functioning modern society and everything good had been learned from the Japanese. Unlike these mainlanders — and often they wouldn't even say mainlanders, they would often say, unlike these Chinese — who spit in the streets and don't obey traffic rules and are unruly and disorderly and horrible in every way. They wanted to be more like the Japanese. Of course, this is not an accurate description or even an accurate memory of what it was really like to be under the Japanese, but it was used as a way to really oppose mainland Chinese rule.

One of the more extraordinary moments in researching my book was one afternoon, it was during one of the elections in Taiwan, and I went to see an old friend of mine from Hong Kong, who was called John Shum. He used to be a very famous figure, he was a comedian in Hong Kong movies. He became politically

prominent in 1989 during the Tiananmen demonstrations as one of the people who acted as a kind of funnel for Hong Kong funds and Hong Kong help for the students in the square in Beijing. He was a ubiquitous figure with sort of lots of curly hair and schmoozing the square and so on. After the crackdown in Beijing, he was also very active in getting the Chinese student leaders out. But since then, he'd moved to Taipei.

I went to his office, where he runs a television station, and I asked him about this strange phenomenon, about the native Taiwanese always going on about how terrible the Chinese are and how awful China is and how much better Japan was and how different they are and so on. I asked him for his views and he said, this is all nonsense of course. The Taiwanese, they're just like the mainland Chinese, they're unruly, they spit in the streets, they disobey traffic rules, they have no idea of the rule of law, democracy means nothing to them, and so on and so forth. But, he said, the Hong Kong Chinese of course are quite different. They're civilized, they understand the rule of law, it's orderly and so on. Of course, you know why this is, he said to me. I said, no I didn't, although I knew what was coming. He said, it's because we were under the British.

### **Sense of Distrust Among Educated Chinese**

This shows the sort of extraordinary sense of distrust, in a way, in themselves that I found among educated Chinese. So-called ordinary people, on the whole, don't fret about tradition or civilization or identity, it is an elite preoccupation. But one of the striking things, which I vaguely knew but it became much more obvious to me after interviewing a lot of people, is how close nationalism and a sense of superiority was to a sense of self-flagellation. The same people who would lecture you, indeed, because Chinese intellectuals rather like to lecture, particularly foreigners, but only foreigners — they would lecture you on the

ancient civilization, the superiority of China, the deep feelings and so on. But the same person in a different mood could very quickly flip into the story about everything about China is terrible, the Chinese are hateful people, they lie to each other.

I think the way to explain this is that the assumption of being the Middle Kingdom, and indeed having the most ancient and therefore superior civilization, is so deep that it comes as a great sense of humiliation to see that China has sunk to the level of a third world country. So the self-flagellation is as extreme as the sense of superiority. One can flip into the other very quickly.

To conclude my remarks, and perhaps provoke comment here and then from you, I would like to go back to what I said in the beginning and raise the question once more. Is it true that benign authoritarianism in the form of one-party rule — perhaps the word benign doesn't really apply — authoritarianism in the form of one-party rule is the only way to preserve stability in China? And that any kind of transition to something else, something more democratic, would be chaotic and that the price would be too high to pay and the country wouldn't be ready for it and so on?

### **Authoritarian Government not China's Solution**

I'm, of course, not convinced of this. I would argue, in fact, the opposite. I think that, again, it has to do with this cosmic justification of political rule, of the right to rule. The legitimacy of the Communist Party government before was as much based on dogma as imperial governments were before them, except that nobody believes in the dogma anymore. Even people, members of the Communist Party on the whole don't believe in Marxism, let alone Maoism. It is still a Leninist party and the system of government is still that of a communist government, but communism is not really enough anymore to give the government any legitimacy. What ideological legiti-

macy was left in the late '80s was completely smashed in 1989 when the government turned its tanks on its own people.

Without ideological legitimacy, without the legitimacy of a dogma based on ethics and behavior and being the guardian of Chinese culture and so on, what is left? Just two things. One is the promise that everybody's going to get richer. Well, three things. One is the traditional one that it's the only way to preserve order. Two is that everybody's going to get richer. Well, not everybody is getting richer or going to get richer, and there will be economic crises in China inevitably, as they occur everywhere. A government that has no legitimacy is not well placed to cope with a crisis, because it has no flexibility. People don't really believe in its right to rule anyway. If things go wrong economically and people feel left behind and left out and impoverished, things could get very ugly indeed. I think that the likelihood of violent upheavals in the countryside and among unemployed workers and so on are not unlikely.

The only other form of legitimacy that would be left would be the nasty kind of ethnic nationalism, which is already much in evidence, and which would deflect domestic unrest into belligerency abroad. In the first place against Taiwan, I would say, and that would lead to all kinds of other unpleasantness. Unfortunately, the kind of nationalism that is now abroad in China is actually not based on ancient Chinese culture at all, even though some of its proponents might think so. It is based on equally European ideas as the democratic ones. It is the mostly German idea of the nation-state as a kind of ethnic family and the idea of blood and soil and so on, which is not a traditionally Chinese one but came really in the late nineteenth century, influenced by Europeans, mostly German thinkers. It's precisely the kind of view of society that the Japanese adopted after the Meiji restoration and became more and more extreme, also often as the result of economic crises, and ended up in belligerency abroad. It is not to be

hoped that the Chinese will go that route, but it is certainly not to be dismissed either.

In other words, and I would conclude with that, I would turn it around. People who say that one-party authoritarian rule is the guarantor of stability in China, I think in the long run — in the short run it might be a messy process, inevitably it will be. But in the long run, a democratic, more representative system will be the only guarantor of stability in China. Thank you very much.

**Minxin Pei:** It's embarrassing to confess that not having read Ian Buruma's book and having read only a very brief book review of the book, I presumed, now it seems it turns out incorrectly, that he was going to talk about the overseas Chinese dissident community. Did you cover that community in your book?

**Buruma:** This is — you mean in America in particular? Yes, yes, sure.

**Pei:** So I prepared my remarks focusing on that particular group. Now, after listening to his remarks, I find myself rather unprepared to deal with the central issue he has raised, which is really the idea of the one-party system of authoritarian rule as the guarantor of stability in China. Let me just first briefly address the issue of authoritarianism and stability in China, then I think say something about the role of dissidents, overseas dissidents, in Chinese politics or the future evolution of China.

### **Communist Party Cannot Guarantee Stability**

I think few serious people in China outside the Communist Party or even inside the Communist Party would treat the idea that China's peace and stability can be guaranteed only by the Chinese Communist Party. I think even though the party itself would like to use this as one of the claims to rule, the people I meet in China who do look beyond the current phase believe that something other than the

current system is not only possible — not only desirable but possible.

The issue is how to get it, because Ian's remarks, he said in the long run a democratic system will be the true guarantor of peace and order in China. I personally believe this. Many people in China believe this. But in the long run — the problem is the short run, the transition itself, will be so fraught with uncertainty and very possibly upheaval that even if you have a transition you may not end up getting it. Here's why I think that even though democratic institutions are compatible with Chinese history or Chinese tradition, and I think democratic institutions are increasingly embraced by a rising number of Chinese people, the real challenge for China is not to instill the idea of democracy but to find practical ways of instituting democratic institutions.

### **Transition to Democracy**

China's transition to democracy will most likely face enormous challenges, for the following reasons. First of all, the size of a country does matter. I think if you look at large countries, large countries tend to have more problems, because of diversity, because of historical accumulated tensions, and also because of ethnic problems. The example of Taiwan is encouraging, but I'm not going to bet the farm that China's evolution will evolve a la Taiwan, because Taiwan after all took fifty years to move to where it was and from a much more favorable base. China's smallest province is larger than Taiwan, if we exclude Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, these three municipalities. So even though I think theory does not provide a lot of support for the idea that size somehow will influence politics, but in reality it does.

Second, I think the current regime is particularly poorly prepared or equipped to deal with a democratic challenge. Most importantly because this is a regime that has not really faced up to its own misdeeds, if not atrocities, in its fifty years of rule, so as a result a lot of

historical issues have not been addressed. If the Soviet collapse is an example, a period of Chinese glasnost is likely to unleash a flood-gate of grievances and anger and recrimination, and you may likely see an evaporation of legitimacy, rather than a gradual erosion of legitimacy. That situation is most likely to be destabilizing, rather than enhancing stability.

Also, over the last twenty years, this party's single-minded focus on developing the economy has ironically undermined its political capacity, especially the capacity to mobilize public support at the most critical junctures. So if you look at how this party has dealt with serious challenges to its rule, 1989 and most recently the Falun Gong movement, it has not relied on trying to mobilize public support through various political organizations or mechanisms, but rather has used the military and the security forces to maintain rule. That actually shows the weakness rather than the strength of the current regime. So in the event that in a democratic transition rising challenges threaten the survival of the regime, you're not going to have a peaceful resolution.

I think finally, in the case of China, we have to recognize the uniqueness of the Chinese state. The Chinese state is a party state, which means that if you take away the Chinese Communist Party there is no state. So if the Communist Party should collapse, there is a failed state. There's no state there. So you will, I think, in that situation likely to have chaos. I'm not saying that the claim that the Communist Party guarantees the peace in China because it is the Communist Party. I think even though on its face this claim may sound true, if you look behind this claim the problems are caused by the Communist Party itself, rather than by Chinese history or Chinese reality.

### **Role of Chinese Dissidents**

Finally, I want to say something about overseas dissidents, even though your book is about them, in your talk you did not mention

them. Many people ask whether they are going to be an effective force in the future evolution of China. My own assessment is that is not, because if their record of the last ten years — because a real Chinese political diaspora did not come into being before Tiananmen and before the exiles following Tiananmen, largely because they have not been effective in either influencing American foreign policy vis-à-vis China. On several critical issues they did not play a decisive role or any role, any discernible role in changing American foreign policy. Also, they have been fairly ineffective in influencing American public opinion, for a variety of reasons. They have not been able to organize support among the overseas Chinese community at large. So the diaspora itself is isolated in key metropolitan areas. Finally, they have not been able to influence events and developments in China.

I think the reasons for their ineffectiveness are both structural and also internal to the special characteristics of a diaspora political movement. I think structurally speaking, such groups — the Chinese diaspora is not that different from other political diaspora groups. Once they are uprooted from their own countries, they find their voices very limited, their resources very scarce, and their ability to sustain themselves both politically and financially overseas is very limited.

But in the case of the Chinese diaspora, I don't know how extensively you analyzed their actions in this country, I think they ought to blame some of their own conduct and practices for their lack of effectiveness. First of all, I think there's a strong personality conflict in this community. Factions proliferate and many strong characters do not like to compromise with each other and reach some sort of cohesive arrangement in order to maximize their voice and effectiveness.

I've observed them in action myself, and I like to joke that once a communist, always a communist, because the way they deal with each

other is not that different from the way the Communist Party deals with these dissidents within China. Also, I think personal failures of leaders in terms of as it collapses. I'm not going to mention any particular examples.

So in the future, I think when China does undergo this very treacherous process to democratic rule, the limited ability of this group to influence China's events will be very limited because the longer the exile lasts the more forgotten and the less relevant they will become. New social and political elites will emerge in China who will have their own basis of support and the overseas diaspora will be simply cut off.

Second, I think Chinese nationalism will play a role, because a democratic China does not necessarily mean a less nationalistic China. Of course, in this country we have a different name for nationalism; we call it patriotism. Overseas dissidents' association with so-called anti-China forces will undermine their acceptability within China.

Finally, when there's a regime change in China, the overseas dissidents will have to compete with other voices and groups inside China. They just cannot simply return to China and claim power. All you need to do is look at what happened to the Soviet exiles who returned to a democratic Russia and promptly disappeared from the political scene and the attention of the West. I'm fairly confident that if China becomes democratic and the overseas dissidents want to return, what will be waiting for them will not be the fate of the Taiwanese dissidents, but rather the fate of the Soviet dissidents. Thank you.

**Dimon Liu:** Good evening. I have left teaching university too long ago now to indulge in two-handed analysis, on the one hand and then on the other hand. I will give it to you straight. I like this book very much and I recommend it to you. Ian writes about these rebels as characters and he encapsulates their personality and their concerns very well, very succinctly.

The descriptions are always sharply etched and they are sometimes deliciously skewered, but never without underlying sympathy and seriousness. The chapter on Wei Jingsheng is very fine and the chapter on Singapore is especially fine. I know both of these subjects very well, but to my pleasure and to my surprise I found things I did not know before.

This book deals with serious issues and during Ian's brief talk he asked the pertinent questions. I had prepared for myself for four areas to comment on, but Ian brought up so many new subjects, which I wanted to comment on, so I think I will truncate some of those things and cut short some other comments. It is, of course, much more fun to disagree with Ian, especially when it's done over a fine meal. So I will start with disagreeing with some of the issues.

### **Cultural Determination**

This question of cultural determination, if you are of one culture therefore you will always be one way. This is, at the moment, a very popular issue, a very popular concern. I understand that Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations* is flying off the bookshelf. I hate to see this man being enriched by bad ideas, but they are very bad ideas. Cultures are not about ideas. Culture is about values. If a culture can maintain the proper values, then their culture will be more successful.

There was at one time that some Islamic cultures were far in advance of Western culture. I would argue that Western civilization did not begin until there was separation of church from state. Until the nineteenth century, China basically run parallel in terms of wealth and development with Western civilization.

Now, the question is that why did China not develop? Why did China not have a Renaissance? Of course, there are other serious intellectuals who point a finger at me and say, other ancient civilizations, once it's deteriorated you can never come back. Look at the

Egyptians. I won't mention his name; he's one of the most well known intellectuals in this country, look at Western civilization. It did come back. It did have a Renaissance in the sixteenth century. Why shouldn't China?

### **China's Inability to Achieve Modernity**

The question is that what is it about Chinese civilization, what is it about modernity that is so unachievable by China? Why is it not the Chinese are able to adopt modernity? Of course, Ian says, the Chinese ought to have copied the Japanese. The Japanese have been able to do it. My argument is that I'm not sure the Japanese have been able to do it. I don't think Japan has a very interesting democracy. I'm being very provocative here, you can yell at me.

This has something to do with the definition of modernity. Lenin once said, you may have electricity, then you have a modern society. As one of my relatives would have put it, you can teach a monkey how to use electricity, but a monkey is not about to invent electricity.

Here again, Ian argues the Kuomintang, the Nationalists, were the embodiment of the essentialness of Chineseness, the Chinese cosmic order, the Chinese idea of a state. Then he argues along the same lines with the communists, that again the communists embody this unchanging idea of what China is. I don't think so. I think that both the creation of the Nationalist Party and the creation of the Communist Party was in fact China's attempt of Westernization. Both of those ideas were essentially European.

In 1919, the famous May 4 movement had this famous slogan — even Fang Lizhi, the famous dissident, the first thing he did when he left the American embassy, when he gave his first talk to the West in Paris, was talk about total westernization. They explicitly reject China's past. The Nationalists adopted nationalism because they felt that was the quickest way to westernization. The Chinese Communists

adopted communism because they felt that was the quickest way to westernization, to modernity, as if that can be achieved by some kind of magic. Mao's idea of magical socialism is pretty bizarre, but there is nothing modern about it.

So the question here is, what is modernity? The concern here again and again by Ian, by President Bush, the first President Bush, by many of the Sinologists, by my friend Pei Minxin here, is stability, stability, stability. As if stability itself is the goal, is the reward. No. There are different kinds of stability. There can be the stability of death. There can be the stability that enables people to go on to live creative lives.

One of the reasons China has lagged behind is because it has lost its ability to be creative. If you lost freedom, you lose ability to become creative. If you cease to be creative, the only thing you can do is follow other people's behind, you copy other people's creations. A small place like Singapore can copy others. A big place like China cannot. But the irony is, the ruler in Zhong Nanhai advocates Singapore as the model to copy, as if this man in Zhong Nanhai had effectively bound the feet of this great big person as the mainland. So this giant, this 1,200-pound gorilla is walking around with bound feet. How can it go anywhere and be anything but comical and pathetic?

### **Inefficient Nature of Democracy**

Let's talk about transition. How do you move from point A to point B? How do you become a democracy, which is the model that's most effective in protecting freedom? Many authoritarians have argued with me, democracy is really lousy because it's so inefficient. I like democracy because it is inefficient. It is so inefficient that it banned the ruler from being abusive to the people. There are so many checks and balances on the government itself that the people's freedoms are better protected. I like democracy precisely because it is inefficient.

Not all democracies are alike. There are better democracies and there are worse democracies. In fact, Taiwan's democracy now is more interesting and more dynamic than Japan's democracy, and certainly more creative. I have been a long-time defender of India's democracy. Compare Indian democracy to China's tyranny, the people of India are far better off. Fewer of them die, both from hunger and from abuses. But as a democracy, Indian democracy is pretty lousy, when you compare it to more dynamic ones in the United States, more creative ones.

A comment simply on the transition, how do you move from point A to point B, not mentioning what kind of model of democracy you've got. Anybody who argues about a slow transition, I will tell you he is not a democrat. At least he's not a serious democrat. Confucius actually — nobody reads him at all, not even the Sinologists, certainly not the Mandarins. The way they did it to Confucius is that they make everybody read them and take an examination. That is the way the rulers of China robbed the Confucians of their backbone. They paid them very well, they forced them to memorize. As one of my relatives would have put it, even a monkey can pass those examinations if he has a good memory. The Mandarins became a tool of oppression of the people. If that is the case, you cannot have a creative society. For a thousand years, there was no major invention from China, even though the thousand years before China was incredibly inventive.

The point I'm making is that you've got to make the transition, you have to make it quickly. Confucius has said very clearly, you want to change your society, you can change the direction of society in one day. He can complete the change in three years. To put it in a more colorful way, the advice that Milton Friedman had given to George Young in reforming the economy. If you're going to chop the tail of the dog off, don't chop it section by section, because each time you chop it the pain is the same. You chop the whole tail

off in one chop. If you chop it off section by section, you will simply lengthen the suffering of the dog.

Finally, I would have liked to have talked something about the rebels, but since I don't have any more time I will reserve that in the question and answer period.

## Q & A

**G. John Ikenberry:** Thank you very much. We're going to open it up, in the spirit of democracy, and take a few questions or comments from the floor. Please identify yourself and then we'll throw it back to Ian Buruma, who will respond and perhaps weave some of his reactions to the discussant comments into his remarks.

**Questioner:** I'm with the Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shimbun*. I recently lived in China, I spent two years. One of the many slogans that probably said something — that probably related to the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy or professed legitimacy is the one called "spiritual civilization." Usually it's accompanied by or preceded by the word "socialism." So the socialism part is very easy for me to understand, but spiritual civilization as a Chinese Communist Party slogan is a bit intriguing to me.

I asked many of my Chinese friends what it is, what it means. One of the answers I get is simply it would mean not to get involved in any bribery. But maybe some of you can shed light on this matter.

**Buruma:** The way I would interpret it is what I was trying to talk about, is how politics and the justification, and the legitimacy of rule is claimed, because the rulers claim not only to be governing secular, temporal, political institutions but also indeed be the guardians of spiritual civilization. I clearly expressed myself badly in my talk, because I think I was slightly misunderstood. I didn't say that either the KMT or the Communist Party actually did

represent anything that can be described as Chinese civilization, all I'm saying is that they claimed to represent it. In the case of the KMT, claimed to represent traditional culture; in the case of the Communist Party, an alternative to it, but an equally ethical or spiritual one. I was talking about claims, not actualities. But I think that the idea of spiritual civilization fits in very well with that rather Confucian idea of being the source of morals and ethics as well as political governance.

**Pei:** Ian is interested in ideas and their role in politics. I'm a political scientist and I have a much more practical interpretation of this phrase, "socialist spiritual civilization." It was invented around the mid-1980s as a result of the leadership's own anxiety about the unintended consequences of market reforms. Their idea is to borrow the market economy without having the attached political, spiritual or social values. The analogy they used is how to — when you open the windows some flies are going to come in. So you have to invent your own flyswatters. So the "socialist spiritual civilization" is supposed to be a set of values yet to be defined and identified and found, to counter the bourgeois liberalism, which is really a catchall phrase for all kinds of things Western, other than technology, market economics and things considered materially useful for China.

**Liu:** I think it is much better to understand it in the way from how — to look at how the Chinese Communist Party had evolved. Historically, the Communist Party is made up of two factions and is a very uncomfortable mix. One is the National Socialist and the other Social Democrats. The two have never really gotten along very well. In the case of China, the Social Democrats had always lost. Gorbachev is a Social Democrat and he won in the end because he had a lot of help from the West. In China, consistently it has been the National Socialists that have won.

The idea of modernity also shifted. First it was Lenin's phrase "electricity." You electrify

the country; you become modern. The Chinese Communists or the National Socialists adopted this idea, getting rich would make you modern. I'm not sure that would actually make you modern, but that was the idea and that was the idea of you spread around the lucre, the money around, everybody's corrupt. Then this mutual corruption would make the regime survive. But no spiritual purity is going to save that.

**Questioner:** I was very struck by the fact that one could listen to the presentations by Ian Buruma and Minxin Pei, which were very different in their emphases, and yet conclude that there was no logical disagreement between them. One might say that one was speaking to the long-term, to broader principles — Ian Buruma — while Minxin was pointing to the practical difficulties of the transition in the short term. I wonder if I can try to tease out whether there are any more fundamental differences. I wonder if Ian Buruma might say something about what he sees as the prospect of mechanisms by which there could be a transition in the relatively short term.

Then from Minxin I'm wondering — it seems to me there's an implication in what you were saying that the transition would be easier later on, but I wonder why and when. Precisely because all the grievances you spoke of that were building up, it seems to me one could make the case that therefore the longer it's delayed the worse the problem's going to be.

**Buruma:** I agree with you, I think the longer it is delayed the worse the problems will be. I think it's a colonial idea that the people aren't ready. The people are perfectly ready. The assumption is always that the people have to be more educated. There's a very strange thing going on here in China. Those who tend to defend the status quo point to the village elections — isn't that a great beginning, they say. It's very odd that the people who have instituted the village elections are the very people who often say first you need the population to be educated, they have to be more

sophisticated, they have to understand what democracy is and so on, otherwise they make big mistakes.

If that's the case, why are the only people who have the vote in China the least educated people, in tiny villages and rural areas? Of course, village elections in my opinion are rather a sham, but yes, I think the longer it's postponed the worse it is bound to be.

### **No Great Obstacles to Democracy**

I don't think that there are great cultural, traditional or other obstacles to the transition. It is a question of political will. If, let us say, assume, that in 1989 the party had split under pressure of the demonstrations, and a moderate faction had won and had been forced to concede that in six months there would be elections and parties were allowed to be formed and so on. I see no reason why that would have ended in disaster. But by the same token, I don't see the Chinese Communist Party going that route anytime soon.

Gorbachev has been a disaster for China, because — and by the way, Gorbachev is not a Social Democrat, he was a Communist who thought he was going to save the Communist Party by introducing all kinds of reforms that in the end led to political suicide. But that's precisely because he did that, the Chinese Communist Party realized that's not the way they want to go. So I don't see it happening in the short term, but I agree with you that it would be desirable if it happened in the short term.

**Pei:** Very quickly, I think the longer it delays the big move — because democratic transition consists of many types of policy adjustments, institutional reforms, it's not really one bang. You don't say I declare democracy, tomorrow China is a democracy. That would indeed be a sham and a likely nonviable democracy. I would say that if the current government in China does not implement incremental steps toward a more open political system, such as expanding the village elections to township

elections — and here I don't agree with Ian's characterization of village elections as shams. The truth is it's very mixed. I think eventually China will have a so-called Chinese democracy. Certain parts of China are likely to be semi-failed societies where other parts of China can be striving, vibrant democracies, because China itself is a continent. The diversity of conditions does not allow us to make easy generalizations.

But in terms of transition, I do see three to five years as a window for incremental changes to be initiated, in order to minimize long-term risks. If on the other hand those steps are not taken, then the risks of regime collapse and post-transition or transitional collapse will be very high.

**Liu:** I'd like to make one point on this. Actually, to construct democracy is a very different process than incremental. You do have to have a kind of consensus among people in the position to make changes. One of the reasons why China always has so many difficulties is because tyranny itself had curtailed the open discussion, the open debate, on how to construct democracy. The tragedy of the Chinese rebels of the last 150 years is that one generation does not share the same ideas as the next generation, always, a generation rebelled on their own separate from the subsequent generation. There is no mutual communication, there is no forum where such discussion can go on reasonably. The debates are not conducted in a way that is conducive to creating consensus.

It is not as if there — you actually don't need that many people to create change. If you look at the Americans who created democracy, here in the United States 200 years ago, there's not a whole lot of them. But they had a forum to create a series of papers called the Federalist Papers, where they laid out what needs to be done. There's no such thing in China. It cannot be done in China, because a majority of the debate on how to construct democracy would be debased.

**Ikenberry:** I want to ask a question, take the privilege of the chair. I wanted to see whether Ian could respond to Minxin's point about party and state being collapsed into each other in China and how would democracy emerge if in effect the party collapsed and were destroyed in some way by events. What is the character of the political, sociological infrastructure of the society, of the country, that would allow for pluralistic parties and the kind of competitive structure of democracy to emerge? Is there enough of a civil society and what would be its modalities or its access points?

**Buruma:** I don't think that China in this sense is unique, because after all the same was true in the Soviet Union and in other communist societies in other parts of the world. As soon as you have room for more parties, you can construct a state fairly easy based on democratic institutions. The question is where you get that kind of room. I don't think that the Communist Party is prepared to do that.

The reason I said that the village elections, why I'm skeptical about them, is that they're a mechanism to make Communist Party rule more efficient, not to create more pluralism. The reason is the central party wants a more reliable channel to remote rural areas, so that people can choose their own candidates but those candidates all have to be subservient to the party. Once it gets beyond the county-township level, then it will get interesting. Once it becomes — the areas where people can vote become large enough that they can't simply vote for local personalities but where you actually do need parties, then you start getting the beginnings of a multi-party system. I think for that reason the Chinese Communist Party is not likely to tolerate that.

Civil society is, I think, a much-abused term, but it tends to come up with a more pluralist, open system. As long as the party in power crushes every attempt of community, of organization, whether it's of a religious, cultural or political nature, that is not under the control of

the party, you cannot get the beginnings of civil society.

**Questioner:** I think that the gentleman here about the democratic question and John's question actually summed up some of my main points, but nonetheless I'll ask you a question. First of all, Ian's statement that democracy will be the long-term guarantor for stability. Very sobering statement, I like it very much. But when I listen to Minxin's so-called pragmatic diagnosis of the problem and grievances, it looks like we are talking about how to reach Korean unification. Everybody's talking about we must have it, but nobody knows how to reach it.

Seeing the process of Korean democratization as well as Taiwan, also maybe remotely Japan, I think this Asian, Confucian, whatever civilization background, revolution or changes are not coming from the under, it's coming from the upper, so-called socioeconomic political elite.

If the Chinese are moving from point A to the other side to achieve democracy, my question is basically, is there some kind of a hidden or under the surface, very angry, frustrated elite within the party, within the military, that can maybe make some kind of a — I shouldn't say network, but at least some kind of a meeting point, gathering consensus, that we cannot continue this way. In a sense, is there any kind of hope or maybe space for them to really start some kind of small agitation toward a bigger agitation, particularly within the military? I think that's the very interesting question I would like to ask the both of you.

**Buruma:** It is a very crucial question. I think the problem is, as far as democratization is concerned and the elite being sort of the vanguard of this — in 1989, you saw a glimmering of what is possible. But as you say, in Confucian societies with a Confucian background, in Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and so on, all show this, the people who govern these societies tend to be very good as

assiduously co-opting the elite behind the government by giving them a sort of niche, by making it worth their while to be conservative about the status quo.

That's exactly what the Chinese Communist Party now is trying to do too, by incorporating business people, by making into sort of a middle-class party, as it were, which is a very odd aspiration for a Communist Party, but that's what they're doing. They're doing really what the PAP has done in Singapore and what the liberal democrats have done in Japan, is take as many people of the elite and make it worth their while to become conservative.

I think for a long time that could actually work in China, and they buy the elite off, as it were. Not necessarily crudely with cash, but by giving them a place in the way the society is governed.

**Questioner:** I work for a Japanese news agency, Kyodo. I lived in China and Hong Kong for years and covered extensively the area. My question is that, mainland China and Hong Kong democracy activists are so nationalistic, with the exception of Taiwanese people and activists — by the way, I totally agree with Ms. Liu, that democracy is thriving on that island. I see real democracy there. But when I look at the attitudes of those mainland and Hong Kong democracy activists, it is so out of my imagination. There are few activists that told me that it is better to demolish Taiwan if they become independent. They still talk about democracy of their own.

In the case of Hong Kong, with the exception of Mr. Martin Lee and Ms. Emily Lau, the representative democracy activists are so nationalistic. I was in Hong Kong from '96 to '97. There was a *Diaoyutai* (islands claimed by China and Japan) movement, as we remember. The whole place became hysterical about that. They didn't even talk about this handover, they talked about this *Diaoyutai*. I couldn't talk with them rationally. It was my biggest question from them, why those people, very democratic people about the idea of the future

of China, but then at the same time so ultra-nationalistic. I'm wondering if it's going to become a big problem if China becomes democratized.

**Buruma:** I think as a Japanese, if you look at your own modern history, you'll find an answer to this, which is that Japan — again, I expressed myself badly in my talk. If I gave the impression I was saying China should copy Japan, I was saying exactly the opposite. It is not to be hoped that China will go the same route as Japan, because Japan in the late nineteenth century, after the Meiji restoration, the elite was faced with different models of how to go, how to modernize and democratize society. One was the sort of Anglo-French model, which was essentially republican and had a national identity based on citizenship and rights and so on. The other one was the more German model, which was to take politics out of public life, rule in an authoritarian way and give people a sense of cohesion by stressing the nation as a family, ultra-nationalism, nativism, blood and soil and so on.

When intellectuals start to talk that kind of language, it's often out of political frustration, I think. It's precisely if you take the politics out of public discourse and when it becomes impossible for people to be citizens and feel that their citizenship in a democratic manner is what defines them, then they start going in the other direction and start stressing ethnic nationalism, racialism and so on. I think that's what happened between the 1880s and 1945 in Japan. It could very well happen in China again. Chinese intellectuals are as vulnerable to that kind of stuff as intellectuals unfortunately are everywhere.

**Liu:** I'd like to add to this. When we look at the construction of democracy it is always a elite equation, regardless of what society you look at. In England during the Magna Carta, it was still nobles. If we look at Benjamin Franklin and George Washington and Jefferson, they were the elite of the society. To change a society, it doesn't matter what culture

one subscribes to or one chooses, it's always the elite that is able to make the change. Really for any society, if you want to look at the future, you look at the rebels. You do not look at the middle class. You look at the middle class for stability, you look at the rebels for the future of change. If your public discourse is truncated, as you have watched in Chinese society, either in Hong Kong or Singapore or mainland China, then I do not think you get the best of the discourse. It cannot simply say that is the nature of the Chinese people. The nature has been suppressed.

**Pei:** Just one possible explanation of politics. That is, although I do not believe that such nationalist sentiments are fake, I do believe that political considerations play a role in the feverish pitch of nationalism. In the case of China, patriotist sentiments or speeches or acts are the only kind of things that — the only things the citizens can engage in without fearing reprisal from the government. In fact, they can be more patriotic than the government. So in a way, it's some kind of politics practiced against a repressive government, which really forbids them to express themselves in most other areas.

**Questioner:** My question has to do with what Japan has called *gaiatsu*, or foreign pressure. A couple weeks ago, there were some speakers here, one former, rather senior American official who was talking about the presence in the U.S. government of very strong animosity toward China, and up to September 11 extreme suspicion of Chinese motivations on the world stage, a view of China as an enemy, a future enemy to the United States. Although this has changed a bit, he was saying that this sense is still there among various levels of government, different agencies.

You also have here, a year ago or so there was a very strong movement of labor unions, pro-Taiwan groups, others, against China becoming a member of WTO and becoming a normal trading partner with the U.S. Their view is very much that China is not even a legitimate

country. If you talk to some labor unions here, until China does not have a communist government, it's not a legitimate state. This very strong anti-communism is very strong here.

So you have this distrust of China, and I'm wondering, these are people who, particularly labor union and human rights groups, who claim to have the best interests of the Chinese at heart, yet they're very opposed to the idea of the Chinese communist state. But how do Chinese dissidents view such people? I understand when the U.S. bombed the embassy during the war in Yugoslavia there was a lot of anger among normal, rank-and-file Chinese citizens.

But what is the view of Chinese, your average dissident, toward this kind of American activist who doesn't even see the state as legitimate but professes to want to have democracy in China? How do they view such people?

**Pei:** I think if you talk about labor unions, their involvement in China-related issues is very suspect because of the involvement of self-interest. I've been observing them for quite some time, and I do not believe they really care about China. They care about their jobs. So their criticism of Chinese policies is hypocritical to me, even though I do not consider myself a dissident. As for others, I think American officials who have somewhat a dark view of China's future, I think they're entitled to those views.

China's uncertainty does represent serious policy challenges to American national interests. Of course, we disagree as to where China is going, but this does not mean that those people should not be allowed to voice a somewhat more skeptical view about China.

**Questioner:** I was wondering about the interplay between culture and politics. Is it possible to have a democracy without changing the culture first, if it's really going to be a participatory, creative democracy? You started off your talk by saying that politics and culture need to be separated.

**Buruma:** But there are plenty of examples of countries, which went from dictatorship to functioning democracies which didn't go through huge cultural changes. Is that so? Did Korean culture fundamentally change from the early '80s to the late '80s? Korean culture – then we use culture in such a loose way that one wonders what it still means. Also, democracy flourishes in places of such varied cultural traditions and backgrounds and histories and so on, that it seems that democratic institutions as such are rather neutral as far as culture or religion is concerned. In theory, they can operate anywhere.

That's precisely what I'm arguing against, is this idea that you first have to change the whole culture or the spiritual life. For example, several people I've written about in my book have taken exactly that view. They started off as Maoists, lost their faith in Maoism, often came over here and then became Christian evangelicals, arguing that China can only have democracy once every Chinese has been converted to Christianity, which is an extreme version of what you're suggesting. So I think that's the wrong way of looking at things.

**Liu:** When you ask a question like that, the underlying question is does a culture

determine politics. I personally see cultural determination as a very primitive idea. If you look at Spain, Spanish culture is thriving under democracy much better than it was under Franco. In 1992, precisely when this idea of cultural determination came from Britain, I went to the Oxford University debating society to argue the point that culture does not necessarily determine politics. If you're interested, I'll give you my debating notes.

**Questioner:** When you look to certain historical examples, such as the rebellions in the movements in the 1960s in America or even 1920s America, or perhaps Falun Gong, in which different cultural — not cultural, but value systems, and you equate it — you said culture is about values, not about ideas. That those represent threats in themselves, so that perhaps the link between culture and politics is closer than it seems. What do you think?

**Ikenberry:** Any final thoughts from our panelists on that issue?

**Buruma:** I'm thought-out.

**Ikenberry:** I think that is a sentiment widely shared and so we are going to wrap up. Will you please join me in thanking Ian Buruma and our discussants. (End)

## About the Panelists

### Main Speaker

**Mr. Ian Buruma** is an author and journalist based in London. He writes political and cultural commentary on Asia for *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Republic* and *The Guardian*. Mr. Buruma also has been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Institute for the Humanities in Washington D.C. He was educated in the Netherlands and Japan. Mr. Buruma is the author of *Bad Elements: Among the Rebels, Dissidents, and Democrats of Greater China* (2001), *The Missionary and the Libertine: Love and War in East and West* (2001), *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (1994), *God's Dust: A Modern Asian Journey* (1989), and *Behind the Mask: On Sexual Demons, Sacred Mothers, Transvestites, Gangsters, Drifters, and Other Japanese Cultural Heroes* (1984).

### Discussants

**Ms. Dimon Liu** is an author on China and a human rights activist whose areas of expertise are China, human rights and democracy. She was the former executive director of the Committee for Policy Studies and the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy. Ms. Liu has been involved in human rights issues since 1972 and recently organized a campaign that helped to free several scholars from imprisonment in China. She received a B.A. in architecture from the Pratt Institute and a Diploma in Development Planning from University College, London University. Ms. Liu's articles on human rights have appeared in many journals and newspapers including *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs* and *Newsday*.

**Dr. Minxin Pei** is a Senior Associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Before joining the Carnegie Endowment, he was a professor in the politics department at Princeton University. He has received numerous awards, including the Olin Faculty Fellowship, the National Fellowship of the Hoover Institution and the Robert S. MacNamara Fellowship of the World Bank. Dr. Pei received a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University. He has written *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (1994). Dr. Pei also has published articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

### Moderator

**Dr. G. John Ikenberry** is the Peter F. Krogh Professor of Global Justice at Georgetown University. Additionally, he was a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. Dr. Ikenberry is the author of numerous publications, including, *State Power and World Markets: The International Political Economy* (forthcoming), *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (2000), and *Reasons of State: Oil Politics and the Capacities of American Government* (1988).