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FORESEEING THE UNFORESEEABLE

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The consensus is stronger than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis that the resilience of the authoritarian regime in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is approaching its limits. To be sure, this feeling in part reflects the fevered atmosphere that surrounded the PRC's once-per-decade leadership succession at the Eighteenth Party Congress of November 2012. But according to some of the best-informed observers, including the contributors to this symposium, deep changes have been taking place that will eventually have major consequences.¹

Regime transitions belong to that paradoxical class of events which are inevitable but not predictable. Other examples are bank runs, currency inflations, strikes, migrations, riots, and revolutions. In retrospect, such events are explainable, even overdetermined. In prospect, however, their timing and character are impossible to anticipate. Such events seem to come closer and closer but do not occur, even when all the conditions are ripe—until suddenly they do.

In analyzing what may sooner or later happen in China, it is helpful to review what we know about the dynamics of such events. Theories of “threshold models,” “revolutionary bandwagons,” and “informational cascades” share a logic that runs as follows:² Imagine that the forces arrayed against change are dominant—change fails to occur. Now imagine that the balance of forces shifts until the forces favoring and opposing change are closely balanced—a stalemate results. Suppose again, however, that the balance shifts further, so that the forces in favor of change are stronger than those against it—and yet, nothing happens.

Why is this so? Because no actor knows for sure that the balance has

actually tipped. People may speculate that it has, and some may gamble by taking action. But—and this is especially likely to be so under the kinds of conditions created by authoritarianism—the information that people need to make an informed choice about whether to come out in favor of change is hidden. Quoting Václav Havel’s parable of the greengrocer who hangs a proregime slogan in his shop window “because everyone does it, and because . . . if he were to refuse, there could be trouble,” Timur Kuran calls this phenomenon “preference falsification.” A majority, even a vast one, may want change. But when each actor weighs the benefits of stepping forth against the danger of being punished for doing so, most stay silent.

Until, that is, a triggering event occurs. Theory does not tell us what this event has to be, or why it has the magic capability to unleash change when other, similar events do not. But whatever it is, the trigger moves a new group of citizens, still a minority, to reveal publicly their dissatisfaction with the status quo.

At this point, theorists ask us to imagine that the ratio between the desire for change and the fear of repression is unevenly distributed across the population. The dissidents and “troublemakers” who always act out regardless of consequences have ideals that are greater than their fears. But they are a constant. What starts a cascade is the first group of ordinary citizens whose distaste for the status quo suddenly overwhelms their fear, or whose fear becomes less. Once that group has acted out, the group with the next largest desire-to-fear ratio perceives that support for change is more widely shared than they knew, and repression more costly and less likely. This shifts their desire-to-fear ratio enough for them to join the movement. This in turn affects the desire-to-fear ratio of those belonging to the next most fearful group, who also join.

In this way, an “informational cascade” occurs, as each shift in the publicly available information about the public mood alters the calculation of the next group. As Kuran puts it in his analysis of how the East European communist regimes collapsed in 1989, “seemingly unshakable regimes saw public sentiment turn against them with astonishing rapidity, as tiny oppositions mushroomed into crushing majorities.”³

Something like this happened in China in 1989. The desire for change was strong and widespread, but people were afraid. Then a small group of students knelt before the Great Hall of the People on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square to demand democratic reforms in the spirit of the recently deceased liberal leader Hu Yaobang. The regime failed to repress them promptly, sending a signal of indecision, and more students—the group with the next-strongest desire for change and a reduced fear of repression—came to the Square. When they in turn were not quickly punished, much of Beijing joined the demonstrations, followed by the citizens of more than three-hundred other cities around the country.

No one knows why one “collective incident” and not another is capable of sparking a cascade. Perhaps the outbreaks that have been occurring ever more frequently in China have been too small and too local.

No one is able to say for sure whether, when, and how change will come. From where we sit, on the unpredictable side of what may turn out to be an inevitable event, fundamental change in fact continues to look unlikely.

Perhaps the regime has responded too deftly with a mix of punishments and concessions.

Moreover, the PRC is not East Germany. It is not the client of a hated foreign power, but a rising state proud of its prospects. Its economy is growing faster, not more slowly, than those of its neighbors.

Three other contrasts are important. First, citizens’ access to information about what other people think is not as occluded in China today as it was in the East Germany of the

1980s. The rise of the Internet and social media—as well as a more sophisticated government propaganda strategy that floods citizens with harmless information and allows a limited level of grumbling for tension relief—has allowed citizens to know a fair amount about one another’s desire for change. Everyone knows about the problems of corruption, land grabs, environmental pollution, and the polarization of wealth. Citizens are widely aware that the regime itself says the political system needs to be reformed.⁴ Paradoxically, however, information overload may actually *weaken* the prospects of an informational cascade, because relatively routine outbreaks of protest send a less dramatic triggering signal than would be the case where protests are more rigorously suppressed. The kind of message the regime censors especially strictly is the type that proposes a concrete blueprint for change, such as the one found in Charter 08.⁵ The difficulty that people have in envisioning an alternative to CCP rule is one of the greatest obstacles to voicing a demand for change.

Second, on the repressive side of the equation, the police in China are more numerous, better funded, more technologically advanced, and more skillful in the arts of repression than in other authoritarian regimes.⁶ They seem so far to have kept up—even if the race is a tight one—with the rise of the Internet and new social media, censoring messages that they view as threatening, posting messages that support the regime, and punishing messengers whom they consider particularly dangerous, such as Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei. So while people may know more about one another’s desire for change than they do in the classic cascade model, they also have a frightening picture of the regime’s capacity and willingness to repress critics.

Third, the PRC regime as it stands today is more adaptive than other

authoritarian regimes. The leadership proactively addresses the most neuralgic sources of popular dissatisfaction by making health and retirement insurance available, attacking corruption,⁷ cracking down on the worst polluters, and increasing the appearance of transparency and accountability with devices such as e-government, opinion surveys, and limited-scope elections. The regime likes to *talk* about making itself more democratic, installing the rule of law, and promoting human rights. The apparent goal is to build a form of one-party rule that people will accept as responsive and legitimate. The PRC's rulers look to Singapore for an example of how that sort of thing can be done, even though conditions in that tiny and wealthy city-state are different from conditions in China.

Even if the East German scenario is unlikely to apply in its specifics, the general threshold model still might. Perhaps the key variable in the cascade model of political change is fear, and that seems to be diminishing. As it does so, the chances increase that the desire for change will find wide expression.

For change to happen, there will need to be a breakthrough moment. Do we feel that moment coming? The essays in this symposium canvass a wide range of dissatisfied actors and propose or imply a range of possible scenarios. We can imagine many possible triggers, including the bursting of the bubble economy, violent confrontations with local demonstrators, a protracted power struggle within the regime, or a natural disaster or public-health crisis that exposes scandalous incompetence or corruption. Even though the regime has recently survived several such scenarios (the Sichuan earthquake, the Western financial crisis, the tainted-milk scandal of 2008; the Wenzhou train collision of 2011; and the Bo Xilai incident of 2012), the occurrence of another could, unpredictably, lead to a different outcome. Perhaps the power-deflationary event to which this particular regime is most vulnerable is a foreign humiliation. That is one good reason why the PRC has been relatively cautious in its foreign relations—even, I would argue, as it ramps up its assertion of territorial claims in the South China and East China Seas.

No one, however, is able to say for sure whether, when, and how change will come. From where we sit, on the unpredictable side of what may turn out to be an inevitable event, fundamental change in fact continues to look unlikely. Small farmers are unhappy, but they live scattered across the countryside and far from the center of power. Worker unrest has increased, but it focuses on enterprises, not the government. Intellectuals are weak as a class, divided, and unable to spark resistance. Civil society is growing in scale and potential assertiveness, but remains under effective government surveillance and unable to form national linkages. Independent entrepreneurs have ideas and means, and show increasing initiative, but their stake in stability makes them cautious.

The broad middle class sees through the regime but is busy enjoying itself. National minorities such as the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians live on the periphery of a vast continental landmass and are culturally and socially cut off from the much larger Han Chinese majority. When

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it comes to defecting from the existing order, each group seems likely to look at the others and pipe up with a hearty “After you!”

So too with forces within the regime. The elite is evidently divided, to judge from the story of Bo Xilai, the high-flying, charismatic Chongqing Communist Party boss and political rising star who was undone by a scandal involving murder and corruption. Yet the damage from this embarrassing case has apparently been contained. The

Party’s privileges remain intact. The military and security forces seem willing to keep doing their jobs. Local-level officials, who shoulder the impossible task of mediating between state and society, might have the most to gain from a change of system. Yet if they ever tried to link up with one another to form a bloc powerful enough to effect change, the risks that they would face would be staggering. This is not 1911, when power was dispersed, the center was weak, and the premodern state of the information and military technologies then prevalent in China kept central authorities from intervening strongly in the localities.

And yet, the expectation of dramatic change persists. The very anticipation of such change, even if it is unfounded, imparts a particular type of “meta-instability” to the Chinese system today. There is a sense of impermanence that we do not find in mature political systems—no matter how troubled in other ways—whose members operate on the assumption, wise or not, that their system is lasting.

Change, if and when it happens, will not necessarily come in a form that we envision or that Chinese actors prefer. Some Chinese form of democracy is one possible outcome, but since there is no well-developed opposition movement (as there was in Taiwan before its democratic transition in the late 1980s), the prodemocracy forces would have to come from inside the ruling Communist Party. A Chinese Vladimir Putin might emerge to reconsolidate authoritarian or semiauthoritarian institutions. A crisis might even galvanize a shift from social dissatisfaction to social support for the current regime. Or China might descend into disorder, a scenario that no prodemocracy activist, Chinese or foreign, wants. What one can say, however, as we wait for history to deliver its answer, is that more and more people believe some kind of change is coming.

NOTES

1. For another excellent analysis along such lines, see Yu Liu and Dingding Chen, “Why China Will Democratize,” *Washington Quarterly* 35 (Winter 2012): 41–63.

2. Seminal statements are Mark Granovetter, “Threshold Models of Collective Behavior,” *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (May 1978): 1420–43; Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics* 44 (October 1991): 7–48; Susanne Lohmann, “The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91,” *World Politics* 47 (October 1994): 42–101.

3. Kuran, “Now Out of Never,” 13.

4. On this point, among many sources, see Cheng Li, “The End of the CCP’s Resilient Authoritarianism? A Tripartite Assessment of Shifting Power in China,” *China Quarterly* 211 (September 2012): 599–602.

5. Jean-Philippe B  ja, Fu Hualing, and Eva Pils, eds., *Liu Xiaobo, Charter 08, and the Challenges of Political Reform in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

6. Xu Youyu and Hua Ze, eds., *Caoyu jingcha* [Close encounters with the Chinese PSB (Public Security Bureau)] (Hong Kong: Kaifang chubanshe, 2012).

7. Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).