Chinese Communism and the 70-Year Itch
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The Seven Year Itch fashioned a classic American romantic comedy around the notion that after seven years of marriage, a spouse's interest in a monogamous relationship starts to wane. The premise of the Marilyn Monroe film made for some great laughs and iconic images, but it was not pure fancy. A lot of studies over time have shown that the average length of a first marriage is about seven or eight years.

There is an interesting parallel in politics; specifically, the life span of one-party regimes, though in this case we might call it the "70-year itch." The U.S.S.R. is a prime example. By the time Mikhail Gorbachev took command of the Soviet Union in 1985, the rot in the Soviet system, and the corresponding decline of its legitimacy, were well advanced. "Interest in the marriage" had long since begun to wane. Gorbachev's efforts to revive it with political opening and economic reform (*glasnost*and *perestroika*) only enabled the marriage to break up peacefully. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Communist Party had been in power for a little more than 70 years. Similarly, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled in Mexico from its founding in 1929 until its defeat in the 2000 elections—71 years.

Several of today's remaining one-party authoritarian regimes have been in power 50 to 65 years, and there is good reason to think that they, too, are now facing the "70 year itch." Part of the problem is that revolutionary one-party regimes like those in China, Vietnam, and Cuba cannot survive forever on the personal charisma of their founding leaders. Mao and Ho Chi Minh are long since gone, along with all the other leaders of the revolutionary founding generation, and in Cuba the Castro brothers are in their final years.

A more basic issue is that these regimes have a tough time achieving what Max Weber called the "routinization of charisma" because of a dilemma that confronts all modern dictatorships. They are damned if they perform and damned if they don't. Once the revolutionary fervor of the founding period fades, the only means they have to establish their legitimacy is through successful performance—in essence, economic development. If they do not perform, then they may stagger on for some time with raw coercion and external assistance (liked that which North Korea gets from China, and Cuba from the Soviet Union and now Venezuela). But such external dependence leaves them highly vulnerable, and performance failure drives growing societal alienation and defection, as we are seeing now in North Korea and Cuba.

However, if, as in Vietnam and especially China today, authoritarian regimes do "deliver the goods" of development, they face—as the PRI did in Mexico—a different dilemma. It is impossible to create a middle-class society without eventually generating middle-class values and middle-class organizations. Poring over attitudinal surveys, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel showed in their 2005 book,*Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*, that "socioeconomic development tends to propel societies in a common direction … regardless of their cultural heritage." With rising education and incomes and growing access to information, people become more tolerant of diversity, more demanding and assertive, and more willing to protest. Their value priorities shift from seeking material gain and security to seeking choice, self-expression, and "emancipation from authority." Closely intertwined with this psychological shift is the rise of a civil society—of independent organizations and flows of information, opinion and ideas. These psychological and social changes undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian rule and generate favorable conditions for a political transition to democracy.

This is the historic social transformation that is now under way in China. It is fortunate for China and the world that the China is approaching the "70 year itch" after a period of authoritarian success rather than failure. More than three decades of breathtakingly rapid economic growth have lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty and have created a society and economy much better able to implement democracy than would have been in the case if China had remained mired in North Korean-style poverty, stagnation, and totalitarianism. Moreover, as charitable, environmental, and other organizations gain autonomy from the party and state, as people spread critical opinions on blogosphere, and as protest movements organize against environmental degradation, corruption, and other abuses, the Chinese are gradually learning the arts and skills of citizenship.

However, it is only at the weakly organized level of society that any preparation for democratic change is taking place. Many had hoped that China's recent leadership succession—which replaced the stolid conservative Hu Jintao with the seemingly worldly and upbeat Xi Jinping—would inaugurate a badly needed and much-delayed process of political reform. But within months of Xi's accession to the presidency in March, those hopes had been dashed. Xi and his six colleagues on China's super-powerful Politburo Standing Committee have wasted no time in signaling that their aim is to preserve political control and double down on ideology. In a bizarre quest to graft innovation on to anachronism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is preparing to supply millions of its members with special cell phones that will instantaneously deliver the latest ideological instructions and propaganda themes while enforcing better "discipline" among increasingly decadent and corrupt party officials.

To be sure, the Party is pushing hard to rein in and punish corrupt officials at various levels. It is embracing municipal efforts, like deliberative polling, to become more responsive to public concerns and preferences. And it is allowing some scope for the digital expression of public sentiment, particularly on the micro-blogging site, Sina Weibo, which hosts 100 million messages a day. All of this is meant to modernize authoritarian rule, making it more accountable and responsive without risking any erosion of the Party's political monopoly.

Political leaders and analysts often reason by historical analogy. For China's leaders, the analogy that obsesses and frightens them is Gorbachev. The memory is visceral: the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square (a near-death experience for the Party) escalated when Gorbachev visited Beijing in May. China's current rulers began their ascent to power when Gorbachev's policies of economic and political opening "caused"—in their view—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Soviet Communist Party. Above all else, Xi desperately does not want to be the Chinese Gorbachev. But in his obsession with avoiding becoming another Gorbachev, he is governing in a way that will bring about Gorbachev's fate—the collapse of the party and the regime under his rule.

For Xi and his colleagues, there is a way out. They could buy significant time by launching a gradual process of democratization—something like what their old rival, the Kuomintang (KMT), did in Taiwan after losing the Chinese civil war. They could introduce competitive elections to determine who governs at lower levels of authority. Back in the late 1980s, village elections in China looked like a start down this road. By the time I observed them in 1998, a Chinese official in charge of administering them was predicting that the process of competitive elections would move briskly up the ladder of political authority. In five years, he anticipated, they would rise to the township level; in another five years to the country level; five years later to the provincial level; and then finally five years later still there would be democratic elections for the national government. 15 years after that hopeful prediction, township elections remain in an "experimental" state, village elections confer no significant

governing authority, and the CCP appears frozen with fear at the prospect of opening the system to real electoral choice and accountability (even on a non-party basis).

This political inertia cannot last. Five or ten years ago, most experts on China regarded predictions of the early demise of Chinese communist rule as ridiculous or fanciful. The party, they insisted, had become extraordinarily institutionalized and effective at governing. But today—even with all of China's impressive economic achievements—more and more American and other China experts believe there is a political crisis brewing. In clinging to its absolute political monopoly, in resisting any serious effort to separate the party from the state and the judicial system, in demonizing and arresting—or in the recent case of Peking University professor Xia Yeliang, firing—dissenting voices calling for democratic reform, the CCP is skating on thin ice.

When you skate on ice, you can't necessarily tell when it is thick or thin. It may look perfectly sturdy—able to sustain a virtuoso performance—until suddenly it no longer is. Today, China's Communist Party may be one big crisis—an environmental catastrophe, a collapse of the residential housing market, a massive corruption scandal at the highest levels—away from a snowballing of protests that leads to the sudden collapse of its authority. Corruption and cynicism are now so widespread among CCP elites, and they have hedged their bets so extensively (sending much of their wealth and even their children abroad), that when political authority unravels it could happen very rapidly, in what Minxin Pei has called "the political equivalent of a bank run."

The sudden death of Communist Party rule is not likely to be a good thing for China—or for its neighbors, such as Japan and Taiwan, or for the United States. A chaotic political vacuum in China could be filled by the military, or by other actors ready to rally public support by playing the nationalist card. They might launch a military strike against the disputed islands in the East China or South China Sea, or even against Taiwan itself. Moreover, it would be much harder for China to construct a functional democracy following a sudden collapse of Communist authority than it would be if China follows the gradual approach that Taiwan took.

If China is to avert a systemic political crisis, its leaders must start implementing real political reform. It is not only 1.3 billion Chinese, but the entire world that has a huge stake in this process.