

# De Tocqueville in Beijing

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Even as public attention has been focused on the ouster of Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai and the trial of his wife, Gu Kailai, as well as the upcoming 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, there has been a quiet but interesting discussion going on in Beijing about Alexis de Tocqueville's classic work, *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, first published in 1856. Although seemingly far from the concerns of the day, the interest in the work in fact captures widespread concern in intellectual circles about the state of the Chinese polity and where it might go from here.

While attention, both in China and abroad, has focused intently on the upcoming 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the extraordinary events leading up to it (particularly the removal of Bo Xilai, the trial of Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, the trial of former Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun, and whatever decision the party comes to on Bo Xilai himself), there has been a fascinating discussion about a topic seemingly far removed from the *sturm und drang* of elite politics, namely Alexis de Tocqueville's *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution* (usually rendered 旧制度与大革命 in Chinese). Published a century and a half ago, de Tocqueville's work has long since become a staple of history and social science classes in Europe and North America, so it seems anomalous that this work has suddenly become a hot topic of conversation in Beijing.

This classic work on the French Revolution stirred great interest when Hua Sheng, a well-known economist who was very active in the reform discussions of the 1980s, tweeted, "I went to the sea [海, an apparent abbreviation for 中南海, the seat of Communist power] to see my old leader. He recommended I read Tocqueville's *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*. He believes that a big country like China that is playing such an important role in the world, whether viewed from the perspective of history or the external environment facing it today, will not modernize all that smoothly. The price the Chinese people have paid is still not enough." Since Hua Sheng used to work under Wang Qishan, the current vice premier in charge of financial affairs, everyone has assumed the reference to "my old leader" indicates Wang.<sup>1</sup> Wang himself graduated from the History Department at Northwest University (西北大学) in Xian and worked for a while in the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Apparently he continues to enjoy reading history in his spare time.

It has also been reported that Wang visited Oxford University in September 2011 and had a lively conversation with Chinese colleagues over lunch. Wang reputedly said: "Deng Xiaoping said that it will take the strong efforts of several generations, perhaps even tens of generations, of people for China to really catch up with the West. The People's Republic of China has only been established for 62 years; the economy has only really

developed for 33 years. Can we really become the world's best country in an instant? It's difficult. We probably have not yet suffered enough or paid a high enough price. Simply said, we still have a long way to go."<sup>2</sup>

Wang's comments appear to have fallen on fallow ground because they hit at both prevalent discontent in China and at a sense of not knowing how to escape it. As one blogger put it, "without doubt people's living standards are far above what they were 30 years ago, but, on the contrary, people's discontent with society is greater than ever."<sup>3</sup> Or as another put it, "It seems as if reform has become a sign of the impending death of the old system in front of our eyes; it's better not to reform because as soon as one reforms then the end will come faster. . . . It is better to wait for death than to go out and seek death."<sup>4</sup>

The interest in de Tocqueville's work revolves around what is sometimes called the "de Tocqueville paradox" (actually one of several in his work), namely that revolution rarely, if ever, occurs when social conditions are at their worst but rather breaks out when conditions improve, particularly when reform improves material conditions.

At least one blogger placed the blame for this paradox on "public intellectuals" (公知). French philosophers, offended by the privileges of aristocracy, conceived the idea that all people are born equal. They mapped out plans for a new society, "but not one of them had any experience in government; it was all in their heads." What made these public intellectuals dangerous, the author contends, was not just that their ideas were accepted by the general public, but also that many aristocrats supported their ideas as well. "These aristocrats completely forgot that once these theories were universally accepted, they would inevitably turn into political passion and action, finally destroying the entire *ancient regime*." Of course, the end result was not only the destruction of the old system but also the emergence of a yet more centralized and autocratic, not to mention violent, system under the *Directoire* and then Napoleon. Pushing his point home, the author asks, "Having read to this point, don't you feel that China now is nearly a copy of France in those days?"<sup>5</sup>

De Tocqueville was, of course, a complex and subtle thinker who not only pondered the irony of improving societies exploding in revolution but also thought about the possibilities of incremental reform. Although he tended to dismiss such possibilities in France, where he contended the monarchy had successfully eliminated all social forces that might have eased the transition to democratic governance, he nevertheless explored the possibility of incremental transition. Thus, another blogger concludes that de Tocqueville thought that local self-government and free association (what would now be called civil society) were the most critical elements in fostering a peaceful transition from autocracy to democracy. Both were important in preventing the collapse of societal institutions, which could lead to revolution, and preparing the ground for institutional reform. The implication was that autocracies that were too successful in eliminating contending forces—like the French monarchy—were more likely to end up with violent revolution and even greater autocracy.<sup>6</sup>

Another theme explored by bloggers was the irony that French thinkers had begun with the ideal of equality but that the French Revolution had ended with an even more centralized and autocratic government than they had begun with. French thinkers had “erroneously taken a country with a rich historical tradition for a blank sheet of paper, trying to draw the ‘most beautiful blueprint’ according to their hearts’ desire.” The result, of course, was the bloody Reign of Terror, and the desire for liberty, under anarchic conditions, turned into a search for a savior.<sup>7</sup> Although the author makes no mention of the Chinese experience, it is hard to imagine him writing these words without thinking of Mao Zedong’s famous description of the Chinese people as “poor and blank.” After the PRC was established, Mao said, “Our new China is like a blank piece of paper on which we can write the most elegant characters and paint the most beautiful pictures.”<sup>8</sup> In any event, he concludes that de Tocqueville proved overly pessimistic—that even as he was writing during the reign of Louis Bonaparte, the French people were making incremental progress toward democracy that would later blossom, and the Chinese people can do even better.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the French Revolution, which used to be held up as an exemplar precisely because it was bloody and decisively ended “feudal” society, has given rise to a new conversation about not only the need for self-government, an independent judiciary, and a constitutional government, but also about the difficulty of reform at the current time. Whereas a decade ago reformers were optimistic about the possibility of incremental reform, it seems that many currently see China as stuck between an unsustainable present and the probability that reform will only unleash pent-up demand for immediate democratization. Curiously, this conversation has not generated any reflection (that this author has been able to find) on the reforms Deng Xiaoping launched 30 years ago. There are reflections on the New Policies that preceded the Revolution of 1911, on different types of reform, and on the relationship between reform and revolution in general, but little or none on the reforms that gave new life to the PRC.

## The Problems

The idea that reform has run out of steam gains much support from reports on Chinese society. Mass incidents continue without sign of letup. Although the figures are uncertain both for numbers of incidents and for numbers of participating in them, there have been multiple highly influential incidents in recent months that reflect the inability of local authorities to institute systems—including legal mechanisms—that can resolve disputes peacefully. Last fall international attention focused on the Wukan incident in Guangdong, whereas more recently there have been major protests in Shifang in Sichuan Province and Qidong in northern Jiangsu Province.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the Wukan incident revolved around the issue of land requisition and sale, the Shifang and Qidong incidents focused on environmental concerns. In Shifang citizens were concerned that a proposed molybdenum-copper alloy plant would pollute the local environment. That thousands of residents would take to the streets to protest a new factory in a part of China devastated by the earthquake in 2008 suggests rising concerns over environmental issues as well a disbelief in government promises. The plant had passed environmental approvals, but residents turned out in mass protest “simply because we don’t believe what the

government has promised.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the protest in Qidong focused on environmental concerns revolving around a waste pipe from a paper factory being built in nearby Nantong.

Both these protests, as well as the earlier one in Wukan village, ended successfully from the perspective of the protesters—both the molybdenum-copper alloy facility and the paper factory were cancelled, and the Wukan protest ended with new village elections and the cancellation of the land sale. Such felicitous outcomes might suggest growing people power, but it is too early to suggest that a civil society is emerging. The well-known sociologist Sun Liping discussed the outcome of the Wukan village protest, noting that it required the invalidating of an illegal contract. He noted that such a solution can work in a single or small number of places, but adopting such a solution more broadly raises what he calls a “correction predicament.” The correction predicament is, in simple terms, that there are so many problems outstanding, if one were to attempt to resolve each through legal mechanisms, paying appropriate compensation, the country simply could not afford it.<sup>12</sup>

Corruption is closely related to mass protests because the requisitioning of land and/or the luring of industry through special deals, either of which contains opportunities for corruption, is often what sets off popular protests. But despite some highly publicized prosecutions of officials, the problem of corruption appears intractable. As Wen Shengtang, senior inspector of the People’s Supreme Procuratorate, noted, from January 2010 through August 2011, the People’s Supreme Procuratorate prosecuted 1,978 cases against officials in the National Land and Resources, marking that office as particularly prone to corruption. Altogether over 150 ministerial-level officials have been investigated for economic crimes since 1999. Wen went on to observe that the framework for promoting honest government currently “lacks external supervision and participation” and therefore “easily becomes a formality.”<sup>13</sup>

The reason many Chinese are discouraged about prospects for reform—and thus for reducing the number of mass incidents and the amount of corruption—is that they see “vested interest” (既得利益) as having become powerful enough to prevent any serious reform. For instance, Wang Yukai, deputy director of the China Society for Administrative and Political Reform, has said, “it is necessary to break the stranglehold of the interest groups” by “decisively cutting the ties between government officials and commercial activities.” Wang, like others, has urged that the private assets of public officials be disclosed publicly and that candidates for office be elected in multi-candidate (差额) elections. “The failure to promote political reforms,” Wang warned, “will mean the inability to resolve the risks currently confronting us.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The discussion revolving around de Tocqueville’s classic study of the French Revolution may at first seem incongruous in contemporary China with its rapidly expanding economy and seemingly greater swagger in world affairs, but in fact the fears that Wang Qishan allegedly voiced about the Chinese people likely needing to pay a still higher

price for modernization capture a mood that seems prevalent in China's capital these days. There is a widespread sense that the current situation—absence of political reform, poor governance, widespread corruption, continuing or growing income inequality, and so forth—is not sustainable (as Premier Wen Jiabao has said many times). But the only political leader to have displayed a sense that he had plans for dealing with China's problems was Bo Xilai. Bo's populist, neo-Maoist revival, heavily dependent on bank loans, was not sustainable either, but his removal raises in acute fashion the question: If not Bo's direction, which direction? Perhaps party authorities will articulate a convincing case for ousting Bo and set out a new road map in the coming weeks as the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress approaches and as a new leadership is selected, but so far they have cast the Bo case in the narrowest possible terms. Perhaps that is understandable in the short run as the leadership rallies support for a controversial decision, but it will not be effective over the longer term as a response to the questions Bo and the New Left (not to be confused with each other) raised. Thus, the question at the center of the “de Tocqueville paradox,” whether reform is likely to set off a course of events that will prove uncontrollable and ultimately revolutionary, has evoked intense interest and discussion. That discussion has no answer (or no one answer), but the discussion itself reflects the uncertainty gripping Beijing as the leadership moves toward the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.xinhuanet.com.tw/viewtread.php?tid=7499/>, “王崎山推荐书《旧制度与大革命》” (Wang Qishan recommends *Ancien regime and the French Revolution*).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gongminhuati/article\\_2012072764561.html/](http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gongminhuati/article_2012072764561.html/), 瑞宏斌 (Rui Hongbin), “为什么政府高层热读《就制度与大革命》” (Why are the government high officials enthusiastically reading *Ancien regime and the French Revolution*?)

<sup>4</sup> See <http://zhangmingbk.blog.163.com/blog/static/111950652201262911470179/>, 张鸣, “听闻现在托克维尔《就制度与大革命》流行, 贴一旧文, 奉献给有心人 (Zhang Ming, “Hearing that Tocqueville's *Ancien regime and the French Revolution* is popular, I am attaching an old essay for those who are interested”).

<sup>5</sup> See Rui Hongbin, “Why are the government high officials enthusiastically reading *Ancien regime and the French Revolution*?”

<sup>6</sup> See <http://blog.legaldaily.com.cn/blog/html/11/2467411-23078.html/> 张杨 (Zhang Yang), “重读托克维尔的《就制度与大革命》” (Rereading Tocqueville's *Ancien regime and the French Revolution*).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://blog.legaldaily.com.cn/blog/html/11/2467411-23078.html/>, 李志强 (Li Zhiqiang), “《旧制度与大革命》中托克维尔的宪政思想——革命, 改革与制度建设” (de Tocqueville's constitutional thought in the *Ancien regime and the French Revolution*—on revolution, reform and institutional construction”).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1118479.htm> for Mao quote.

<sup>9</sup> See Li Zhiqiang, “de Tocqueville's constitutional thought.”

<sup>10</sup> On the Wukan incident, see “Guangdong Leads Calls to Break Up ‘Vested Interests’ and Revive Reform,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 37 (Spring 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Shi Jiangtao and Wei Hanyang, “Factory Axed as Shifang Heeds Protesters’ Calls,” *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Sun Liping, “Why Wukan Will Remain a One-Off,” *Jingji guancha wang* in English, April 25, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Wen Shengtang 文盛堂, “2011–2012 年中国反腐败体系的建设和发展” (Construction and development of China's anti-corruption system in 2011–2012), in Ru Xin and Li Peilin, et. al., eds., 2012 年: 中国社会形势分析于预测 (Chinese social situation: Analysis and forecast, 2012; Beijing: Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012), p. 231.

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<sup>14</sup> 呼唤第三次思想解放——专访中国行政政治体制改革研究会副会长汪玉凯 (Calling for a third emancipation of the mind—An exclusive interview with Wang Yukai, deputy director of the China Society for Administrative and Political Reform), 大公报 (*Ta kung pao*), January 20, 2012.