

Theorizing Democratization with Jiwei Ci: Notes on Method

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Democratization has an intriguing role in political science and political theory. It is perhaps the most popular topic in comparative politics at the turn of the century, on the one hand, but remains relatively insignificant in political theory, on the other. Samuel Huntington famously posited that the third wave of democratization started with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974. This wave of democratization caught wide scholarly attention in comparative politics. Scholars adopted democratization as a framework to study regime changes in the late twentieth century and make sense of the conditions favoring a transition towards a liberal democratic regime modeled after the Western European and American political praxes. As Dryzek et al. (2006, p. 28) point out, comparative politics scholars of democratization “generally work with a minimalist account of democracy in terms of competitive elections, developed in the 1940s by Joseph Schumpeter.” Routinized power rotations and the existence of certain institutions largely viewed as liberal democratic—elections, parties, parliaments, etc.—are often considered criteria of democratization. The history of democratic theory since the 1940s barely matters for the comparative politics discourse about democratization.

In political theory, democratization is a much less significant topic, especially in comparison to democracy. The two concepts are clearly related. Democracy refers to a political status where power belongs to the people. Democratization describes the moment or the process a political community

transitions from the non-democratic to the democratic status. As such, democratization is momentary. Political theorists often understand democratization as the moment of founding. Revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are often considered moments of democratization (Urbinati, 2019, p. 112). Once democratization was successful, it seems to matter to the democratized community only in the sense of (contested) historical, institutional, and cultural legacy.

What unites the concepts of democratization in comparative politics and political theory is the understanding of democratization as an issue of significance only for nonliberal democratic regimes. Thinkers theorizing from liberal democracies consider democratization as its past, a challenge that it had well overcome, and a transition that it had fulfilled. For such a regime, if democratization is a topic of relevance at all, it is only because it is a task that awaits some of its diplomatic partners or adversaries—those nondemocratic countries. A significant flaw of this view is that it hinders the understanding of moments of renewal within democratic communities. Democratic communities suffer from internal de-democratizing tendencies, to use Wendy Brown's (2006) phrase. If democratization is understood as a once-and-for-all effort, in moments of crises, advocates of democracy will likely rush to defend existing institutions and norms rather than exploring the crisis as a moment to critically reevaluate how such institutions and norms hinder democracy. In other words, if democratization is once-and-for-all, social critique will largely be evaluated on the scale of how threatening it is to existing institutions and norms, therefore ignoring the democratizing potentials of such critiques. For instance, the rise of rightwing populism in the United States has led defenders of liberal democracy to identify "norm erosion" as the main challenge confronting American democracy because norm erosion "alters the zone of acceptable political behavior" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). By presupposing "acceptable political behavior" as the foundation of democracy, defenders of liberal democracy like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt ignore that many attempts of democratization, either in democratic or nondemocratic countries, appear as unacceptable political behavior at first.

Democratic theorists cannot afford to disregard democratization. Political theorists need to abandon their understanding of democratization as an issue external to established liberal democracies—and, perhaps, of secondary theoretical significance. In this paper, I critically reconstruct Jiwei Ci's theory of democratization. My core argument is that the repertoire of Jiwei Ci's political thought offers us a valuable method to think about democratization beyond the level of regime types. This method, based on a philosophical anthropology of the modern individual that characterizes different layers of constraints of the modern individual's agency, brings out two important and related concepts: plausibility and normative democratization. Plausibility refers to the credibility of interpretations of agency in a given social context. Normative democratization refers to the conscious, collective exercise of agency to challenge the very existing social categories without which agency becomes impossible. However, the application of this method in Ci's writings, as he analyzes contemporary China's political possibilities, is uneven. This unevenness of application, in turn, further demonstrates the importance of normative democratization as political theorists probe political possibilities and impossibilities.

Two clarifications are necessary before I proceed. First, I do not claim that I offer an "authentic" (however construed) reading of Ci's political theory. I merely claim that mine is a plausible interpretation of Ci's political thought, that is, the repertoire of Ci's political thought offers sufficient resources for my interpretation. I trace themes such as freedom, democracy, agency, nihilism, plausibility, and political possibility in Ci's different writings and critically reconstruct his theory of democratization. The main texts I will focus on include a set of articles Ci wrote in the late 2000s and early 2010s that were published as chapters in his 2014 book, *Moral China in the Age of Reform* (hereafter *Moral China*). I will also read Ci's other writings, including but not limited to *Dialectics of the Chinese Revolution* (1994, hereafter *Dialectics*) and *Democracy in China* (2019) in the context of *Moral China*. This

critical reconstruction may stand in conflict with other aspects of Ci's moral and political theory. I will address this tension in the final section of the paper.

Second, I do not claim that my critical reconstruction of Ci's theory of democratization is the only possible way to think about democratization beyond the boundary of regime types. I merely point out that Ci's theory of democratization, as I critically reconstruct it, is valuable for political theorists who want to think about democratization as an issue internal to all political communities rather than a problem only for non-democratic countries. The purpose of my reconstruction, therefore, is to initiate a conversation about how to think about democratization in more fruitful ways rather than to conclude it.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I start with an analysis of Ci's philosophical anthropology of the modern individual. I focus on plausibility and normative democratization as the two key concepts as I reconstruct a method of thinking about democratization informed by Ci's political thought. According to Ci, there are three key constraints of the modern individual's agency—equality, liberty, and nihilism. Plausible interpretations of agency must meet these constraints. Normative democratization is an exercise of collective agency, through internal critique, to challenge these constraints that are often taken for granted and are paramount for the making of agency. Second, I move on to Ci's application of this method in his analysis of how the three modern constraints unfold in Western liberal democracies and China. Ci's analysis demonstrates how political theory scholars interested in China can read Chinese politics not as an essentialist representation of Chinese culture or a unique “Chinese” model of governing but as a different set of answers to the challenges presented by modern constraints of agency. Finally, I analyze Ci's most recent book, *Democracy in China*, and argue that Ci's prudent argument in favor of democratization in this new book implies a deferral

of normative democratization. I analyze what this deferral implies for understanding democratization in China.

Constraints of agency, philosophical anthropology, and normative democratization

Ci's concept of democracy starts with a unique account of freedom, which commands our attention. To briefly summarize, Ci's concept of freedom centers on the relationship between human agency and its constraints. To him, human agency is impossible without a process of identifying with existing social categories. Social categories, in turn, constrains human agency in (almost) imperceivable ways. Ci's concept of freedom, therefore, contains two seemingly paradoxical sides: freedom as identification and freedom as subjection. The core question arising out of this concept is hermeneutical: in any given society, "under what conditions may people come to think of themselves as free or self-determining, while happily and unknowingly allowing themselves to be so massively determined by forces from the outside" (Ci, 2014, p. 48)? Democratic politics, in Ci's formulation, means reflecting on and reshaping the conditions of subjection and, consequently, broadening the political possibilities in a given society. Below, I map out the relationship between these key concepts.

Agency is central to Ci's concept of freedom. Agency is the ability to act freely, but this ability cannot be construed in a sociological vacuum. Ci argues that the freedom to act is "intrinsically constrained by two forms of social external determination: identification and subjection" (Ci, 2019, p. 41). By identification, Ci refers to the process in which individuals identify with a set of social categories prior to choice. Any society or community has a set of values construed as meaningful—however contested they are—and they set the context in which individuals can act meaningfully and purposefully. Without this context of valorization, it is simply impossible for individuals to generate meaning and interpret their actions as pursuing certain meaning. Identification, however, means that subject-making is constantly determined by processes of valorization beyond their autonomous choice.

They are “determined before they can come to determine themselves, and how they proceed to determine themselves cannot but forever stand in a causal relationship to the prior determination from outside” (Ci, 2014, p. 42). Freedom, therefore, always has a layer of freedom-as-subjection. Existing social categories both make freedom possible and also constrains the possibilities of freedom. They are, however, not unchallengeable, as I will explain later.

The two processes of freedom—identification and subjection—make subjectivity possible. Agency, Ci argues, consists of subjectivity and power. A causal mechanism that binds intention and consequence must be attributed to an individual so that they can have a sense of power. In other words, there is an indispensable interpretive and affective aspect of agency. Individuals, when *interpreted* as the cause of important social consequences, feel empowered. Because of this interpretive and affective aspect, agency is always subjective. But it is also not *entirely* subjective: certain social conditions will enable a range of *plausible* interpretations of agency. Similarly, the absence of certain conditions will make some interpretations of agency *implausible*. For example, an interpretation of agency focusing on political empowerment is more likely to be plausible in societies where free and fair elections are held. Plausibility, therefore, arises as an indispensable part of freedom.

As such, plausibility is conditional and context-dependent. The existence of certain social, economic, and political arrangements and institutions (and the lack thereof) defines the parameters of plausible interpretations of agency. For instance, “in a society that does not choose its rulers through universal suffrage, it would be difficult for the attribution of power to ‘the people’ to acquire plausibility and engender a feeling of power necessary for a collective ‘democratic’ subjectivity” (Ci, 2014, p. 92). Modern political values, in Ci’s formulation, cannot be meaningfully incorporated into the modern individual’s agency without confronting the question of plausibility. Making sense of what constitutes the context for plausibility becomes important, as this context not only contains a set of

social categories indispensable for the making of subjectivity but also defines the parameters of plausibility.

What, then, are constituents of this modern context where the modern individual's agency is situated? Answers, as I reconstruct them, are implied in several threads in Ci's writings. These threads can be largely divided into two categories: the global and the local. On the global level, Ci argues that modern society is conditioned by three constraints: equality, liberty, and nihilism. The modern constraint of equality "involves a decisive shift in our approach to hierarchy" (Ci, 2014, p. 196). We no longer find naturally ascribed status acceptable; instead, we attribute status to (various forms) of competition. This constraint of equality is enhanced by the constraint of the (modern concept of) liberty, which stresses "*individual* agency and ... the need to safeguard that agency in terms of *rights*." A plausible interpretation of agency in the modern age cannot contradict these two constraints. Any kind of imposition on the modern individual's agency cannot be justified by reference to either inherited status or pure authority. The imposition of limits on agency must take more subtle ways. In Ci's own words, "under modern conditions, the struggle for domination can be won only when the hand that imposes values is able to render itself invisible" (Ci, 2014, p. 197). The combined effects of these two constraints are so strong that they amount to "a new metaphysics" and have "turned all efforts aimed at achieving other outcomes into an uphill struggle" (Ci, 2014, p. 198).

These two modern constraints are further accompanied by a third, Nietzschean one. More specifically, Ci argues that "the irrevocable loss of any basis ... for openly imposing a unilaterally chosen set of values on human plasticity" is a fundamental condition of the modern individual's life. This is completed by a sequence consisting of two versions of nihilism. First, the Nietzschean idea of European nihilism, which is "not only the devaluation of the highest values but also ... the understanding for the first time of the highest values *as values*, and moreover as values posited by

human beings as conditions for the will to power” (Ci, 2014, p. 198). The establishment of the modern idea of progress is what Ci identifies as the representation of European nihilism. But the potential of this political possibility, Ci argues, has been sufficiently tested. Since “[n]either the nation-state nor the proletariat is any longer viewed as an agent of progress, and indeed the very idea of progress has suffered a fatal blow,” the failure of European nihilism has opened the way to another version of nihilism—postmodern nihilism, that is, the devaluation of “values posited by human beings.” Both the bourgeois and the proletarian versions of progress are now aborted projects. It means that, now, even “values posited by human beings” cannot be imposed upon the modern individual. As such, postmodern nihilism conditions the previous two modern constraints, freedom and equality. Interpretations of freedom and equality, Ci argues, must be compatible with the nihilist, skeptical assault on value and meaning. Freedom becomes freedom *from* any pregiven, authoritative meaning of the good and the “aspiration to be good.” Equality, similarly, becomes the equality of desires, or equality in terms of the absence of any formal limits on one’s desires.

By outlining the three modern constraints on plausible interpretations of agency, Ci situates the modern individual in a philosophical anthropology best captured by his own words:

[N]ihilism, first European and then postmodern, has made it possible for modern people finally to become autonomous ... but the role of nihilism in this process of “enlightenment” also means that this autonomy or maturity will not be placed at the service of the perfectionist ends that Kant, for example, sees as constitutive of human nature. Indeed, freedom from the guidance of another is achieved at the same time as, and indeed through, freedom from the good. And what freedom from the good makes unnecessary and impossible is any distinction between ... autonomy as a normatively appraisable condition and autonomy as merely the psychological state of not feeling imposed upon or unfree (Ci, 2014, pp. 200–201).

These global constraints are further complicated by local, community-specific constraints. In the next section, I will demonstrate how Ci conceptualizes the relationship between global and local constraints of agency by drawing on his analysis of contemporary China. Here, I do not attempt to exhaust all social phenomena that could be considered a local constraint of agency in Ci’s framework.

I merely point out several possibilities by focusing on important threads in Ci's writings. One can start by considering history and memory. How a political community interprets its past is an important theme in Ci's thought. In his first book, *Dialectics*, Ci reflects on the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre and traces how the post-Mao Chinese society turned towards hedonism as its new guiding philosophy. Beneath this turn towards hedonism was the collective memory of a set of failures in the search for meaning—the demise of the Confucian tradition, the bankruptcy of the Maoist pursuit of a better communist society, and the recent disastrous outcome of the democratic movement. This collective memory was the foundation of what Ci identifies as the dominant public consciousness that, “for the first time since 1949 . . . all worthwhile collective goals had been tried and found either wanting or beyond reach” (Ci, 1994, p. 11). In the case of contemporary China, the collective memory of repeated failures excluded certain collective political projects aimed at some sort of common good-based society from the political imagination of contemporary Chinese society. Interpretations of agency, as a result, would become plausible only if they could be compatible with the permeating sense of loss of meaning in contemporary China. Hence the making of a hedonist, commercial subject disinterested in or cautious about political action.

The role history and memory play in terms of limiting plausible interpretations of agency reflects the underlying issue of moral and political repertoire. If the three global constraints—freedom, equality, and nihilism—together give shape to the repertoire for moral and political reasoning in modern society, this repertoire is inevitably mediated by local phenomena, including but not limited to historical memory, institutional arrangements, prevalent ideological discourses, etc. The internal dynamics of such local phenomena make some interpretations of, say, freedom, more plausible than others in a given society. A phenomenological investigation of a particular society, therefore, could reveal to us the possible ways of interpreting the modern constraints in this very society.

To briefly summarize, the making of human agency is a process resulting from interacting with both global and local constraints of agency. These constraints constitute a moral and political web of meaning for the modern individual. The modern individual, as they identify with a set of hidden, unprocessed categories of subjection, develops a feeling of power backed by a set of plausible interpretations of subjectivity.

What, then, does democratization have to do with agency? In Ci's framework, one can at least distinguish between two layers of democratization. The prevalent understanding of democratization in political science as a set of institutional changes such as the appearance and stabilization of free and fair elections, the rule of law, and parliaments still matters, since institutional formation significantly influences both the possibilities of realizing agency and the perceptions of agency. For instance, free and fair elections make it possible for individuals to, on the one hand, exercise a very limited sense of political agency and, on the other, feel moderately empowered as it enables a more or less plausible interpretation of agency associated with the notion of "power to the people." But this empirical or institutional layer of democratization, in Ci's framework, is insufficient by itself. In his analysis of contemporary China, he argues that "[w]hat fundamentally needs to be changed is not merely a political arrangement but, at a deeper level, the conception of freedom and order that informs it" (Ci, 2014, p. 53). This "deeper level" is normative and is fundamental to what institutional changes can achieve in democratizing politics, and is Ci's insightful contribution to our understanding of democratization. From his perspective, even though interpretations of agency are always conditioned by global and local constraints, these constraints are not entirely unchallengeable. Rather,

[T]he fact that subjects are always already shaped by subjection does not preclude the possibility that they can reflect on it and reshape it in significant ways, if necessarily in the manner of internal critique and revision. The true spirit of democracy lies in exploring this possibility, in taking as far as possible the intersubjective determination of the *framework* for the exercise of freedom. Thus, the less the democratic process accepts as given, the more it will live up to the spirit of democracy (Ci, 2014, p. 59).

In other words, the true “spirit of democracy” lies in broadening the horizon of political possibilities. To do so, agents in any given society should exercise their agency intersubjectively to critically reexamine and confront the constraints that both give shape to and limit their agency. Normative democratization involves both a deep understanding of what constrains individual agency and a serious effort to contemplate possible ways to challenge such constraints so that agency can be developed maximally. Understood in this way, normative democratization does not seem to indicate a smooth, automatic sense of progress. Rather, it implies danger in the sense that existing, rather stable interpretations of agency will be challenged and norms constructed based on these stable interpretations will be eroded. It also indicates a contestation over what should be consolidated as the new dominant interpretations of agency. For instance, a neo-Nazi may also make a serious effort to contemplate possible ways to challenge existing modern constraints of agency so he can maximally develop his agency in attacking people.¹ If normative democratization is to lead to any kind of progress, it can only happen by confronting these kinds of challenges that also attack existing constraints of agency. In other words, a sense of telos is implicit in Ci’s understanding of democratization, but for this teleological sense of progress to happen, confrontation with non-progressive or anti-progressive interpretations of agency is inevitable.

One cannot help but notice the affinity between this concept of normative democratization and the first-generation Frankfurt school theorists’ understanding of critical theory: for instance, Max Horkheimer famously proclaimed that the critical theorist’s “critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation” (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 208). Whereas Ci may or may not share Horkheimer’s Marxist insistence on the economic as the fundamental social sphere, his emphasis on intersubjective internal critique of society as a way to

¹ I thank Shoufu Yin for raising this challenge.

democratize the “categories which rule social life” does demonstrate why one needs to confront the dialectical relationship between existing social categories and political possibilities when thinking about democratization, an issue that, too, has been the focus of first-generation Frankfurt schoolers. Absent this normative layer of democratization, the empirical and institutional layer of democratization cannot fulfill the critical tasks of internal critique by itself.

One should note that, for Ci, the “spirit of democracy” is rare. Even established liberal democracies suffer from the insufficiency of freedom and democracy. Therefore, “we have no reason to take any existing societies, including liberal ones, as setting a sound enough example of how to conceive and realize freedom” (Ci, 2014, p. 61). What liberal democracies have achieved is that they have developed concepts of freedom and democracy that allow them to address the constraints in adequately plausible ways so that social and political stability can be more or less maintained. This suggests that, first, democratization is an issue internal to all political communities, liberal democratic or not. Second, comparative democratic theory, in this framework, should focus on comparing what could function as plausible interpretations of agency and exploring democratic possibilities embedded in different interpretations of agency in different societies.

Plausibility of agency in China and the West

Ci’s theoretical approach to democratization underscores why comparative political theory (CPT) has important insights to offer for political theorists’ understanding of modern political values. Consider Loubna El Amine’s methodological intervention in CPT: El Amine (2016) argues that CPT scholars should focus on how modernity, as a “package” that implies a set of normative and empirical constraints, constitutes the shared conditions between “East” and “West.” She urges CPT scholars to take such shared modern conditions seriously. Otherwise, “CPT scholars reproduce the problematic

distinctions between the East and the West” (El Amine, 2016, p. 103).² Ci’s approach to democratization would echo El Amine’s suggestion. For Ci, the “package of modernity” is, indeed, globally shared conditions. But because of different local constraints, these conditions unfold in different ways and result in different answers to the challenges they present. The main context Ci theorizes from is contemporary China. Ci makes no culturally essentialist assumption about China. Nor does he propose any sort of uniquely Chinese model of governing based on contemporary Chinese political experience similar to those of Daniel A. Bell (2016) and Jiang Qing (2012). Rather, through a philosophically informed interpretation of contemporary Chinese history, Ci demonstrates how contemporary China develops its own, insufficient answers to the challenges presented by modernity and how such answers imply political possibilities for China’s future. Before discussing Ci’s analysis of China, I should quickly explain Ci’s understanding of the plausibility of agency in established liberal democracies so that the benchmark of comparison could be set.

As I discussed above, Ci sees that established liberal democracies also fail to achieve the “spirit of democracy,” that is, to truly enable a collective democracy agency capable of enacting effective change. Citizens of modern liberal democracies, Ci argues, “are mainly after ... not political agency but a plausible resemblance of political agency of a (liberal) kind that is conducive to, and sufficient for the purpose of, preventing pure domination and protecting individual freedoms” (Ci, 2006, p. 146). Making the between the freedom of action, that is, the absence of unjustified obstructions of action, and the efficacy of action, that is, the possibility of free actions enacting real political changes, Ci characterizes modern liberal democracies as having high levels of freedom of action but low levels of efficacy. As such, citizens in modern liberal democracies enjoy a “weaker sense” of agency “to

² El Amine’s take is part of a larger debate over CPT methodology. For other positions, see Jenco (2007); March (2009); Williams and Warren (2014). For a sympathetic critique of El Amine which argues that globally shared conditions were already present before modernity, see Yin (forthcoming).

reconcile people to not being able to exercise agency in the stronger sense” (Ci, 2006, p. 150). In other words, the “spirit of democracy” is tamed in modern liberal democracies, and it “always lurks in the background, real and vivid despite its considerable vagueness” (Ci, 2006, pp. 161–162). In this way, modern liberal democracies meet each of the three modern constraints. It meets the constraint of equality by combining formal equality in the public sphere and competitive, unequal recognition in the private sphere; the constraint of freedom by placing negative liberty over positive liberty; and the constraint of nihilism “without even trying” (Ci, 2014, p. 201). By meeting each of the three modern constraints on agency in very limited, compromised ways, liberal democracies present their citizens a plausible interpretation of agency that incorporates a discourse about freedom and democracy.

Here, Ci’s diagnosis seems to echo scholars of democratic republicanism (see, for instance, Dunn, 2000, 2019) and radical democracy (see, for instance, Wolin, 2016). However, Ci underscores that modern liberal democracies tame the collective democratic subjectivity in exchange for what Benjamin Constant called “the liberty of the moderns,” that is, the freedom one enjoys in the private sphere. He sides with Constant as he states that “it is such individual agency, realized in the domain of private life, that matters most for the vast majority of moderns, supplying the ultimate, if a somewhat indirect and by no means the sole, rationale for democracy” (Ci, 2006, p. 161). Modern democracy, both in the empirical sense of institutional arrangement and the affective sense that this institutional arrangement represents any sort of resemblance of the “true spirit of democracy,” is supported by a free, competitive social life where the exercise of agency is relatively unbounded. In turn, free and fair elections grant plausibility to the discourse of political agency that accentuates the power of the people. In this sense, Ci holds that liberal democracy and the liberty of the moderns are compatible, even though it is by no means the only regime type compatible with the liberty of the moderns.

One can perhaps briefly summarize Ci's understanding of plausibility in contemporary liberal democracies as follows: as the end of the Cold War announced the closure of "a space of values" (Ci, 2014, p. 204) and "cast in stone" the constraints of freedom and equality (Ci, 2014, p. 198), liberal democracies have achieved a compromised balance in which the plausibility of agency comes from the bifurcation of considerable agency in the private sphere and limited agency in the public, the political sphere that is just adequate to generate a sense of "power to the people." Neither unqualified praise nor a full-fledged attack, Ci's understanding of liberal democracies seems to be imbued with a sense of pessimism. Because the end of the Cold War has so deeply "cast in stone" the modern constraints of agency, there is little room for normative democratization. The post-Cold War liberal democracies have rather successfully maintained stability and a sphere for the liberty of the moderns, which is a qualified success. How, then, does China respond to challenges presented by modern constraints? In the rest of this section, I read Ci's writings in the early- and mid-2010s before I move on to his more recent arguments in *Democracy in China* (2019) in the next section.

As discussed in the previous section, in his first book, *Dialectics*, Ci characterized China as a society going through a process of desublimation—its dominant, future-oriented ideology faded after the closure of the Mao era. As the utopian aspects of Maoism dissipated, its materialist elements were preserved and converged with the rise of an individualist and consumerist market economy, morphing into a nihilist hedonism that became the guiding spirit of contemporary China. Years later, he qualified this diagnosis because his previous view "seriously underestimated potential contradictions between ... the radically new organizations of desires and the in part (though only in part) old organizations of power relations." China's social issues were not "greatly simplified" by desublimation, Ci (2014, p. 26) argues. In other words, nihilist hedonism did not become the *only* defining feature of Chinese society. China's rapid economic changes, combined with the collapse of the old communist ideological discourse, undoubtedly pushed the country closer towards equality, liberty, and nihilism,

but “these values have not been allowed to run what one might consider their natural course given the socioeconomic reality on the ground” (Ci, 2014, p. 205). The ways in which the three global modern constraints ran their course in China were conditioned by local constraints: the remaining one party-state system, the remnants of communist ideology, and the cultural-ethical influence of Confucianism, as I explain below.

In *Moral China*, Ci characterizes post-Mao China as a society fundamentally shaped by the three modern constraints, equality, liberty, and nihilism. Noticeably, Ci identifies the *social* sphere as the site where these major changes took place (This is the foundation of his more recent arguments in his 2019 book *Democracy in China*, as I explain in the next section). With regard to equality, Ci notes that even though economic inequality was a byproduct of rapid economic growth in Chinese society (similar to its Western counterparts), the less well-off had been increasingly articulating their grievances through the language of equality. In other words, inequality exists as a social fact, but it is “seldom justified in public by appealing to anti-egalitarian values” (Ci, 2014, p. 204). Liberty’s status, however, is the opposite: Ci argues that China has seen the emergence of certain de facto freedoms ever since the beginning of the marketization reform—the freedom of mobility, the freedom to acquire private wealth, and the freedom to pursue personal desires, etc.—but Chinese citizens seldom interpret the life experience of liberty *through the lens of liberty*. In other words, whereas de facto freedoms have become part and parcel of life in post-Mao China, the *valorization* of liberty is yet achieved (see Ci, 2014, pp. 43–45). Finally, in terms of nihilism, Ci argues that “post-communist China fully partakes of the general ethos and fallout of nihilism—the devaluation of Enlightenment values in a broad sense—in which our world is now enveloped” (Ci, 2014, p. 207). But the course of nihilism remains incomplete because, first, the party-state’s refusal to give up on its telos-setting role for the society, thus resulting in a *politically* incomplete nihilism. Second, there is a “widespread yearning for the good and the meaningful, beyond liberty and social justice, among ordinary people” (Ci, 2014, p. 210) that

could be attributed to the enduring influence of Confucianism, thus resulting in an *ethically* incomplete nihilism. As such, the Chinese society is not ready to let nihilism run its complete course.

In sum, local constraints in the spheres of history, politics, and political and ethical culture prevent modern constraints from fully unfolding in contemporary Chinese society. The “incomplete” unfolding of modern constraints in Chinese society traps interpretations of agency in an almost impossible condition: The old interpretation of agency in the Mao era, what Ci calls “agency through identification,” that is, agency through identifying with particular social categories in relations of domination, has lost its ground in reality. A plausible interpretation of agency compatible with the new reality in the post-Mao era is yet to emerge. Later, in *Democracy in China*, Ci would further explore this difficulty of generating new plausible interpretations in contemporary China, calling it a “plausibility crisis” (Ci, 2019, p. 72).

Before moving on to Ci’s latest book, one should consider the implications of Ci’s analysis of contemporary China. At least in *Moral China*, such implications are not fully explored or clearly outlined. But by combining the method of democratization I reconstructed in the previous section and the application of this method in this section, one can infer that Ci’s analysis implies at least two visions with regard to China’s political future. The first vision is that China’s political future depends on how to effectively let the three modern constraints run their courses. This is based on the judgment that normative democratization is hardly possible, or, in Ci’s own words, the difficulty to “imagine, for the foreseeable future, significant weakening of the three constraints on all struggles for domination” (Ci, 2014, p. 202). This judgment implies that China’s political possibilities are limited. China’s political possibilities are to be found in how political actors facilitate or impede the “completion” of the modern constraints’ course. The second vision is that the incompleteness of the modern constraints’ course itself should enable critiques of the modern constraints. In other words,

the judgment is that China should embrace normative democratization to critically challenge (some) categories imposed by modernity, or more precisely, to challenge the interpretations of some categories—freedom, equality, progress, state, etc.—imposed by modernity.³ China may stand in a better position to critically reexamine such interpretations precisely because of the incompleteness of the modern constraints' course.

The bulk of essays collected in *Moral China* was written in the early 2010s, a critical juncture in contemporary China. Decades of economic development had both deepened China's social contradictions and raised expectations about changes to address such contradictions. One important contradiction, of course, was found in the political sphere. The party-state showed little willingness to share power or embrace liberal democratic institutions. But as China approached the end of the Hu-Wen era (2003-2013), discussions about possible political and institutional changes as the main goal of the next administration were not unusual in the Chinese public sphere. Ci recognized that China's future depended "on the tug-of-war between an already proto-liberal-democratic society and a still one-party-led political structure," and the most likely scenario was China would end up in "a prolonged stalemate between society and the political system, and this means essentially a continuation of the status quo." The main reason was that there were no "powerful political forces with a strong vested interest ... or really desperate broadly based social forces ready to take large and sustained risks" (Ci, 2014, pp. 179–180). At that critical juncture, it seems that Ci's vision remained uncertain. His latest book, *Democracy in China*, brings clarity, as he leans towards the first vision I outlined above.

³ Arif Dirlik spent his late career exploring this possibility, especially in his (2011) *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China*. Dirlik's proposal is that to think about China's future, we need a critical historiography that not only criticizes Eurocentrism per se but also transcend critiques of Eurocentrism that quickly reproduce and reaffirm Eurocentric categories.

***Democracy in China* and Deferral of Normative Democratization**

Published in 2019, Ci's latest book, *Democracy in China*, has attracted attention in both public-oriented (Clemens, 2019; Nathan, 2020) and scholarly (Chan, 2022; Fewsmith, 2020; Friedman, 2020; Hasmath, 2021; Kim, 2022; Li, 2021; Lin, 2018) formats. Ci advances what he calls a prudent argument that takes the Communist Party of China's (CPC) ruling power and status seriously. The core argument in this book, drawing inspiration from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, is that democratic social conditions achieved after decades of economic reform and growth have already set a pursuit of political democracy in motion silently in Chinese society. The contradiction between democratic social conditions and an undemocratic political regime will reveal itself in the form of a crisis of legitimacy, which is accelerated by the withering away of memories of the Chinese socialist revolution. All involved parties, most importantly the Communist Party, must respond to this crisis in a way that will bring the form of a regime that fits China's social conditions into existence, which is democracy. It is in the CPC's interest to move towards political democratization.

Notably, Ci identifies *Democracy in China* as an act of persuasion and an exercise of public reasoning. Ci remarks that he is most interested in making a compelling argument plausible enough to all parties involved, including and perhaps in particular the CPC. This argument must be prudent, Ci states, and "[t]he only prudent way of accomplishing orderly and effective democratic change is to try as much as possible to work with the CCP rather than against it" (Ci, 2019, p. 16). In other words, the prudent and compelling argument Ci attempts to advance in *Democracy in China* is subjected to what he perceives as the audience's vested interests. His choice of lines of argumentation is bounded by what he believes to be most persuasive.

Democracy in China builds upon the concepts and arguments articulated in *Moral China*. The crisis of legitimacy is, above all, a crisis of plausibility. It is increasingly implausible for contemporary

Chinese society to be identified as a socialist society and the CPC as a communist party, Ci argues. This implausibility is rooted in the departure between the socio-economic conditions created by decades of marketization and economic growth and fading of the communist grand narrative, as he argued in *Moral China*. Ci argues that contemporary China already has what Tocqueville called the equality of conditions. Equality of conditions is considered a package, as it brings with itself a set of political demands that, left unanswered, will make the ruling party's ideological discourse and legitimating story implausible. The only way to fundamentally resolve the tension between the already adequately equal social sphere and the nondemocratic political regime is for the CCP to devise a democratic type of regime—broadly defined—that is “most consistent or at least reasonably consistent with equality of conditions” (Ci, 2019, p. 133).

To do justice to Ci's sophisticated and extensive arguments in a 433-page book in the rest of the paper is impossible. Instead, I focus on one criticism constantly made by Ci's interlocutors. Many, such as Joseph Chan (2022) and Joseph Fewsmith (2020), criticize Ci for being overly optimistic about what a rather developed capitalist market economy can do for democratization. Chan (2022, p. 452) further argues that “the spirit and strategy of [Ci's] argument is strikingly similar” to the “old modernization theory” most famously articulated by Seymour Lipset.⁴ Chan finds it very doubtful that the modernization theory holds any truth in the Chinese context. But if one understands Ci's theory of democratization, as I do, by not merely focusing on *Democracy in China* but the entire repertoire of Ci's writings, it becomes clear that there is no optimism involved in Ci's arguments in his latest book. Consider the two visions about China's political possibilities I outlined at the end of the previous section: in *Democracy in China*, Ci leans heavily towards the first vision, that China's political possibilities depend on how political actors facilitate or impede the course of the three modern constraints. Indeed,

⁴ Ci (2022) has responded to this criticism and refuted the similarity between his arguments and modernization theory.

one can read *Democracy in China* as Ci's intervention, in a style of public reasoning and persuasion, in the long stalemate between society and the political system.

It seems to me that it is not optimism that is behind this intervention. Quite the opposite, it is a deep sense of pessimism about normative democratization. It is a recognition that China must first complete the course of modern constraints—equality, freedom, and nihilism—before any other political possibilities can be discussed and explored. Hence Ci's occasional reference to a stage theory of history. For example, when analyzing the bourgeois civil society, Ci makes a distinction between the Tocquevillian challenge—that equality of conditions in society makes democracy both possible and necessary—and the Marxian challenge—that the undemocratic nature of civil society makes democracy a feature of the state necessary. He argues that as long as we still live in a capitalist society, we need to combine Tocqueville's and Marx's insights, because “[i]n China and the West alike, the fundamental challenge is that of advancing societal democracy, for in a modern setting nothing is more determinative of the quality of political life than the degree of democracy present in civil society” (Ci, 2019, p. 191). In other words, the Tocquevillian challenge is the challenge caused by a nondemocratic regime's incompatibility with a formally equal democratic society; the Marxian challenge is that caused by the substantially undemocratic civil society's erosion of freedom and equality. To Ci, the Tocquevillian challenge should take priority in China, because China has not even established political democracy. Therefore, “it would be an extraordinary non sequitur to dismiss this Tocquevillian challenge for China by pointing to the failure of actually existing political democracies to rise to the other, Marxian challenge” (Ci, 2019, p. 192). Here, Ci's argument in favor of prioritizing the Tocquevillian challenge in China is based on the assumption of modernity's telos—that the modern constraints must first complete their course before the emancipative possibilities from the constraints of modernity can be addressed. In this sense, it is at least a deferral of normative democratization. It is both a postponement of China's active engagement in challenging the post-Cold

War consensus over the interpretation of modernity and a pessimist outlook about existing political possibilities in contemporary China.

One can, of course, attribute Ci's deferral of normative democratization to his prudent art of persuasion. Perhaps arguing that China must now deal with the Tocquevillian challenge because history progresses through certain stages is a way of convincing China's powerholders. Or perhaps it rejects a potential counterargument that, by drawing on the malaise in liberal democratic societies, advances a Chinese model of a political system that can allegedly surpass the stage of liberal democracy.⁵ This is certainly possible. But Ci's art of persuasion is also simultaneously an exercise of public reasoning. He reasons with the CPC's interests in his mind, but not *exclusively*. His audience includes different involved groups of actors, such as different groups of Chinese citizens. In this sense, it is true that Ci's prudence involves an important dimension of "taking rulers' interests seriously," as theorized by Ben Cross (2022), but it is equally true that other members of his audience, including the Chinese citizens who he considers as demonstrating "a lack of realism" (Ci, 2019, p. 254), are exposed to the same arguments. In other words, Ci's deferral of normative democratization does not merely serve the interests of the CPC; it also serves a training purpose for what he sees as unprepared Chinese citizens. It demarcates the boundary between what should and should not be considered a political possibility.

The real normative question behind this deferral of normative democratization is this: for the pedagogical purpose of democratic training, is it constructive to simultaneously call for political democratization and to significantly limit the discourse of democratization by insisting on the priority of prudent arguments? One should note that *Democracy in China* was written in a global context where the post-Cold War consensus over the liberal democratic interpretation of modern constraints was

⁵ One possible example would be Daniel A. Bell's (2016) *The China Model*.

under siege. An important reason why this consensus is quickly losing credibility, as Ci notes himself, is precisely liberal democracies' failure to protect society from neoliberalism across the world. Although China is not a liberal democratic country, Chinese society suffers from neoliberal encroachment as well. Facing the neoliberal encroachment of the lifeworld, most scholars, including in Ci in *Democracy in China*, assume a two-step approach: first, to democratize, and second, to confront the neoliberal challenge. The logic behind the two-step approach is self-contradictory. It assumes, on the one hand, that democratization will solve the problem, and on the other hand, the problem must be solved after democratization. But Ci's concept of normative democratization, as I critically reconstructed by drawing on his arguments in *Moral China*, offers us an alternative.

As I argued in the previous section, normative democratization implies danger. There is no guarantee that moments of crisis always lead to normative democratization, but moments of crisis are often conditions of normative democratization. Because critical conjunctures, as we are experiencing now, often lift structural constraints to a certain degree, allowing greater room for exercising agency. As these constraints are being lifted, past progress may come under reevaluation or even attack, but this is a necessary process of normative democratization. In the context of China, if a new democratic subjectivity is to emerge, it must emerge through serious reflections on not just China's lack of democracy but also the failures of existing liberal democracies in general, and then outline the political possibilities it sees fit. It cannot afford to limit its democratic imagination merely to meet the ruling party's vested interests (even if it is in the party's interests to democratize). Meanwhile, even if Ci's prudent approach is to become the most plausible and convincing possibility, it can only become a truly strong and viable approach if there are other less prudent approaches to convince the ruling party that Ci's approach is the best-case scenario. It is because of this that normative democratization should not be deferred.

Conclusion

We live in a moment when the so-called crisis of liberal democracy is isomorphic to the rise of China. The latter is often interpreted as a challenge to the post-Cold War global order. The undergirding assumption is that the combination of China's economic success and its global influence, on the one hand, and its political authoritarianism, on the other, represents an alternative path to modernization and national prosperity that does not presuppose a democratic regime. In this framework, China is considered an external threat to liberal democracies. Jiwei Ci's insights on modernity, agency, and democratization show that one should consider the question of democratization as internal to all political communities. Theorizing from contemporary China is not about theorizing the enemy of or the alternative to democracy but about theorizing different answers to challenges presented by modernity.

By emphasizing the importance of plausibility and normative democratization in my critical reconstruction of Ci's method of thinking about democratization, I aim to show how the binary framework that draws a sharp distinction between liberal democratic and nonliberal democratic countries limits our understanding of the possibilities and constraints of democratic politics. Crises are conditions for normative democratization. Dominant ideologies that are uncritically incorporated into our political thinking as common sense, to use Antonio Gramsci's concept, are more likely to be challenged because structural and ideological constraints on the reflexive agency of humans are rather lifted during a crisis. Ci helps us think about challenging our common sense about democracy and democratization with the insights and insufficiencies of his theory.

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