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## Reading Tocqueville in China

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Introducing on the reception and popularity of Tocqueville's ideas in China, this paper explores the certain theoretical perspectives that the existing scholarships have neglected or misunderstood. It argues that the idea of democratic despotism Tocqueville subtly addressed in the final part of the 1840 volume of *Democracy in America* can offer a useful lens for analyzing the situation in China. The paper draws upon examples of historical legacy and political reality to illustrate the relevance of Tocqueville's idea. When Tocqueville's vision does not fully capture the novel phenomenon of totalitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that China had gone through, the paper turns to the theoretical insights of another two thinkers – Friedrich A. Hayek and Hannah Arendt – to supplement our understanding of the daunting problem of ideological violence in Chinese politics and reflect on the prospects of freedom in China.

Keywords: *Tocqueville – China – Democracy – Democratic Despotism – Totalitarianism*

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The relevance of Tocqueville's theoretical perspectives to contemporary China has been widely recognized since the "Tocqueville Fever" in 2012<sup>1</sup>. prospective development to liberal democracy in the Reforming and Opening Era after Mao Zedong's<sup>2</sup> death in 1976 made the historical context for the introduction of

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<sup>1</sup> J. Fewsmith, *De Tocqueville in Beijing*, in «China Leadership Monitor», 39 (2012), n. 1. Available at: <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM39JF.pdf>; M. Chong, *Democracy in China: Tocquevillean Reflections*, in «The Tocqueville Review», 38 (2017), n. 1, pp. 81-111; E. Van Dongen, *The Specter of Failed Transition: Tocqueville and the Reception of Liberalism in Reform China*, in «The Tocqueville Review», 41 (2020), n. 1, pp. 253-279.

<sup>2</sup> As a consistent rule, the Chinese names in the main text will have the surname come first.

Tocqueville's works and the fascination with his ideas<sup>3</sup>. As James T. Schleifer has noticed, the major theoretical themes from Tocqueville's works that attract contemporary Chinese audience's attention include the transition to democracy, the social and moral challenges of living in the condition of modern democratic equality (such as materialism, individualism, and instability), and the more practical question about how to properly understand the nature of the United States and its democracy<sup>4</sup>. Recently, a number of Tocquevillian accounts of "Democracy in China" have been offered by scholars to analyze the situation, prospects, and challenges of China's political development<sup>5</sup>. This paper offers an updated discussion on "democracy in contemporary China" through the "Tocqueville's gaze." It starts from introducing and critically engaging the recent scholarships on Tocqueville and China. I suggest that a notable omission in the previous application of Tocqueville's categories to analyzing contemporary China is the problem of democratic despotism that Tocqueville subtly addressed in the final part of the 1840 volume of *Democracy in America*. I argue that Tocqueville's caveats for the profound danger of centralization and the decline of freedom in this part rightly anticipated the political nature and moral evils of the Chinese authoritarian regime today. I will refer to examples of

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<sup>3</sup> Compared to other modern Western political thinkers (Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx, John Stuart Mill) whose works had been introduced to China as early as in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tocqueville's works were translated to Chinese rather late. A complete version of *Democracy in America* was first translated and published in mainland China in 1989; *The Old Regime and The French Revolution* was translated in 1991; Tocqueville's *Recollections* (on the 1848 Revolution) was translated in 2010. The three volumes are published in the renowned *Chinese Translations of World Classics* series (including Western classics from *The Republic* and *Politics* to *The Spirit of the Laws*, *The Social Contract*, *On Liberty*) by the leading national publisher Commercial Press (Shangwu Yinshuguan). Many new translations of the *DA* and *OR* have appeared thereafter, especially since 2012. Tocqueville's other writings have been introduced and translated in China since 2000, mainly by the leading Chinese Tocqueville scholar Chong Ming (Tocqueville's 1852 address *On Political Science*, 2006; *Journey to America*, 2010; Tocqueville's *Selected Letters* edited by Roger Boesche, 2010; Tocqueville's unfinished draft of the second volume of the *Old Regime*, 2016.) Tocqueville's correspondences with Jared Sparks were also translated in 2011. Trickily, a seemingly pirated translation of the young Tocqueville's travel notes about his trip to Italy and Sicily (which has not even been translated into English) appeared in 2016. The introduction of Tocqueville's name and ideas to the Chinese-speaking world can be traced to earlier times. A Chinese translation of parts of *Democracy in America* was published in Hong Kong in the 1960s. We know that an article by Harold Laski on Tocqueville's ideas (published in 1933) was introduced and translated to Chinese in the Republic of China era (1911-1949) and a newspaper published in English in China at the time had mentioned Tocqueville's name several times. (Thanks to Professor Chong Ming's research and reminding.)

<sup>4</sup> J. Schleifer, *Tocqueville in Japan and China*, in R. Boyd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 230-250.

<sup>5</sup> J. Wang, *The Road to Democracy in China: A Tocquevillian Analysis*, in A. Craiutu-S. Gellar (ed.), *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Global Democratic Revolution in the Twentieth-first Century*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 271-294; Chong, *Democracy* cit.; J. Ci, *Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2020.

historical legacy, prevailing political practices, important reform policies, and renowned social incidents to illustrate the relevance of Tocqueville's concept of democratic despotism to the situation in China. Since the current Chinese regime inherits the troubling legacy of the twentieth-century totalitarianism that Tocqueville could not have fully envisaged, I suggest we draw upon the theoretical insights of another two contemporary thinkers – Friedrich A. Hayek and Hannah Arendt, who were renowned critics of totalitarianism and were also inspired by Tocqueville – to supplement our understanding of the daunting problem of ideological violence in Chinese politics and reflect on the prospects of realizing and preserving freedom in China.

### 1. Tocqueville Looms Large in Contemporary China

The renowned story about the love affair between Tocqueville and China started from high-ranking Chinese officials' recommendation of *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* in 2012, which had brought about a fashion of reading Tocqueville in the society<sup>6</sup>. People's interests were focused on the topic of the so-called “paradox of reform” articulated in Tocqueville's book – the most dangerous moment for a bad government is when that government is attempting to improve itself (*Old Regime*, Book III, Chapter 4). In this sense, Tocqueville's creative analysis of the collapse of the French monarchy and aristocracy and his reflections on the complex experience of the French democratic revolution became appealing to some Chinese leaders as a guidance for avoiding regime collapse in the process of promoting reforms. Tocqueville's perspective echoes the Chinese leaders and elites' strong sense of «an approaching moment of crisis»<sup>7</sup> under the unprecedented transforming conditions of contemporary China.

Before this somewhat surprising intellectual fashion, Tocqueville's works and ideas had already been introduced to China because they contained deeper resonations with China's reform era since 1978 – till nowadays, if not totally terminated by Xi Jinping's regressive rule – when dealing with the complex legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions in the process of maneuvering the economic and constitutional

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<sup>6</sup> Wang Qishan, the principal leader in charge of the anti-corruption campaign under Xi Jinping, recommended *The Old Regime* to Chinese officials in 2012. The Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also mentioned the book. The recommendation for a prominent Western liberal author's work is highly unusual considering the communist orthodoxy of the Chinese government. This incident therefore has received much attention and discussion on the media in China and overseas ever since.

<sup>7</sup> Schleifer, *Tocqueville* cit., p. 245.

reforms has become the key challenge for the country<sup>8</sup>. As scholars have pointed out, Tocqueville's theoretical perspectives have directly entered the domestic debates among Chinese intellectuals in the reform era over the topics of democratic transition, revolutionary radicalism, and the modern values of liberty and equality (and the tension between them)<sup>9</sup>. In fact, Tocqueville's profound and complex analysis of modern democracy has been referenced by Chinese scholars from different ideological stances to assess, persuade, and sometimes dissuade China's development toward liberal democracy.

During the 1980s, in the aftermath of the disaster of the Cultural Revolution and as Chinese just reopened itself to the free world, there emerged the "New Enlightenment" Chinese liberals who called for moving beyond the problematic tradition of the Maoist communism and embracing the modern values of liberty and democracy<sup>10</sup>. After the 1989 Tiananmen oppression and the relaunched economic reform in 1992, the intellectual landscape became more complicated as the theoretical debate on China's reform took place between three notable intellectual camps<sup>11</sup>: the (moderate) liberals who kept calling for following the predominant model of the Western liberal democracy, the "neo-authoritarians" (also identified as "neoconservatives" and overlapping with the nationalists) who prioritized order and argued for strengthening the state power, and the "New Left" who were suspicious toward marketization and sympathetic with the egalitarian ideals<sup>12</sup>. Prominent intellectuals from all the three groups had consciously drawn upon Tocqueville's works to support their theoretical arguments.

For the Chinese liberals since the 1980s, Tocqueville's reflections on the troubling legacy of the long French Revolution<sup>13</sup> had a quick catch on their mind since the Chinese

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<sup>8</sup>J. Ceasar, *Why Tocqueville on China: An Introductory Essay*, in *Tocqueville on China Project*, The American Enterprise Institute, 2010, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Why-Tocqueville.pdf?x91208>.

<sup>9</sup> Van Dongen, *The Spector* cit; Schleifer, *Tocqueville* cit..

<sup>10</sup> J. Li, *The Making of Liberal Intellectuals in Post-Tiananmen China*, Doctoral Dissertation at Columbia University, <https://doi.org/10.7916/D89K4BR6>, 2017, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> The orthodox Maoists, who always made their voices in the political debates since the 1980s, are bracketed here because they rejected the necessity of reform changes out of hand. See J. Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> J. Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Part III, pp. 83-164.

<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville approved the moderate reformism of 1789 but criticized the radical revolutionary spirit in the later stages, which he called a «virus of a new and unknown kind», see R. Boesche (ed.), *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1985, p. 373. Tocqueville once wrote to his friend: «I do not think that in France there is a man who is less revolutionary than I, nor one who has a more profound hatred for what is called the revolutionary spirit (a spirit which, parenthetically, is very easily combined with the love of an absolute government)», *Selected Letters*, p. 113.

society had also fallen victim to the communist revolutionary radicalism in the preceding decades. One of their principal tasks was to understand the deeper reasons behind the predominance of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese revolutions and to find the intellectual sources to help the Chinese move beyond the ideological disaster of Maoism. Tocqueville's works were referenced by liberals like the leading "New Enlightenment" philosopher Li Zehou as a representative of the Western classical liberalism which could teach the Chinese about the real value of liberty and how to avoid imprudent quest for equality and radical changes<sup>14</sup>. Tocqueville's message about cautiously maneuvering the political transformation to modern democracy was also appropriated by the Chinese "neo-authoritarian" intellectuals for their political agenda. Besides Tocqueville's caveat against radical revolutionary changes, his illustration on the distinct nature of American democracy was preferred by them as a practical reason for China not to immediately copy the model of Western liberal democracy but instead to undergo a transitional stage of authoritarian order, like that of Singapore, to consolidate the benefits of propitious social and economic reforms without suffering political instabilities (e.g. neo-authoritarian scholars like Wu Jiaxiang and Xiao Gongqin, who conditionally embraced liberal democracy as a distant, ultimate goal. Wang Huning, who also appropriated Tocqueville, was a different case)<sup>15</sup>.

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Tocqueville was originally aimed at offering a comprehensive analysis of the French revolutionary tradition, but as we have known, he only finished the first part before he died in 1859.

<sup>14</sup> Van Dongen, *The Spector* cit., p. 263; also see J. Liu, *Classical Liberalism Catches on in China*, in «Journal of Democracy», 11 (2000), n. 3, pp. 48-57, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Van Dongen, *The Spector* cit., p. 258; Fewsmith, *China* cit., pp. 83-112. If Wu and Xiao's conservative use of Tocqueville's lesson was still understandable, another representative neo-authoritarian theorist in the late 1980s, Wang Huning, pushed the authoritarian argument to an extreme, by actually misunderstanding and misusing Tocqueville's lesson about American democracy. Wang as a rising young scholar in the late 1980s was renowned for his advocacy for the centralization of the government power (against the current at the time, which was granting local governments with more political and fiscal autonomy) and the importance of maintaining political order in the transitional age. He had become a famous figure since the 1990s when he was recruited as an advisor by the Chinese President Jiang Zemin, and more surprisingly, had not lost favors to Jiang's successor Hu Jintao and further risen to the status of Xi Jinping "Ideology Czar" today. Fluent in French and English literary, Wang was actually among the first in the late 1980s to introduce Tocqueville's name and ideas to mainland China. In his notes of diary published in 1994, he recorded his reading of Tocqueville: «In the early morning I read Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. In the past I have read his another important work *Democracy in America*. The latter is also influential, worth reading.» (1994) One book Wang was involved in translating was Raymond Aron's *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (1999) which highly appreciated Tocqueville's idea. In 1991 Wang published a book titled *America Against America*, based on his six-month academic visit in the United States to about 20 universities and 30 cities. With a few sporadic references to Tocqueville's views in *Democracy in America*, however, Wang's book delivered a very different message from Tocqueville's. While *DA* recognized the viability of American popular politics under the age of equality, Wang presented the American society as haunted with social and cultural crises such as abuse of drugs, rising divorce rate, homelessness, and racial tension. The American democratic politics was full of policy deadlocks and

Compared to the liberals and neo-authoritarians' utilization of a specific facet of Tocqueville's thought, it was a leading New Left intellectual in the 1990s, Gan Yang<sup>16</sup>, who for the first time introduced on the theoretical nature of Tocqueville's ideas (posited in the history of modern Western political thought) to the Chinese audience in a concise and comprehensive way. In an article *Liberalism: Aristocratic or Popular?* published in 1999, Gan accurately grasped the characteristic Tocquevillian "new political science" that identified the principal modern socio-historical trend: the inevitable arrival of the age of "equality of conditions" and the comprehensive political and cultural challenges of adapting to this grand transformation, especially about how to preserve liberty. As Tocqueville pointed out, any effort to defend freedom in the new age could not ignore the prevailing demands of democratic equality. Gan therefore identified a «Tocqueville Problem» – how liberalism «moved beyond» (Gan used the word *yang qi* – meaning not totally rejecting or abandoning but also discretely inheriting) its conservative/aristocratic form and evolved into the democratic form<sup>17</sup>. Gan emphasized how Tocqueville made a theoretical progress compared with Edmund Burke in his diagnosis of the deeper social and intellectual roots of the French Revolution. The lesson was that we had to criticize the revolutionary radicalism by first understanding and conditionally embracing the modern democratic revolution at large. Gan, as a New Left, discussed the «Tocqueville Problem» with a critical message to deliver to the Chinese liberals: as they resorted to the Western classical liberalism to criticize the Chinese revolutionary tradition, some of them harbored an elitist suspicion and even animosity toward the mass majority, and some hailed market

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dominated by elite cooption. Resonating more with Allan Bloom's critique of American cultural decline in *The Closing of the American Mind* than Tocqueville's classical view, Wang regarded America's problems as deep-rooted: a spreading cultural disease of nihilistic and liberal individualism that was eroding the basic order of American democratic politics. Wang was firmly against cultural and political liberalization in China after his American trip. Appreciative of Samuel Huntington's views in *Political Order in Changing Society* like other neo-authoritarians were, Wang argued for prioritizing maintaining the authoritarian political order over the promotion of individual rights and freedom. In a sense, Wang's "neo-authoritarian" theory, by failing to appreciate Tocqueville's true insights, had a significant influence on the Chinese political regression nowadays. See, Fewsmith, *China* cit., pp. 96-100; N.S. Lyons, *The Triumph and Terror of Wang Huning*, 2021, <https://www.palladiummag.com/2021/10/11/the-triumph-and-terror-of-wang-huning/>; C. Che, *How a Book About America's History Foretold China's Future*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-a-book-about-americas-history-foretold-chinas-future>.

<sup>16</sup> Gan studied in the graduate program of The Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago in the 1990s, with close teachers like Allan Bloom, Edward Shils, and Francois Furet, but without obtaining the doctoral degree in the end. Later he became a leading Chinese Straussian and liberal arts education reformer after returning to China in the 2000s. See D. Jiang, *Searching for the Chinese Autonomy: Leo Strauss in the Chinese Context*. Master's thesis, Duke University. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/8841>, pp. 37-56.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Gan, *Ziyou zhuyi: Guizu de haishi pingmin de?*, (*Liberalism: Aristocratic or Populist?*), in «Dushu», 1 (1999), pp. 85-94, 87.

freedom at the risk of neglecting the daunting problems of rising inequalities and social injustices. By enlisting Tocqueville's influential idea, Gan intended to sober the liberals for their simplistic dichotomy of freedom and equality: an emerging contemporary Chinese liberalism, in order to be viable, could not neglect the modern principles of equal political rights and equal respect for all the members of the society.

Although modern China's historical road to "equality of conditions" was notably different from those in the Europe and the United States, Tocqueville's grand and complex account of the modern democratic revolution still strongly appealed to the minds of many Chinese intellectuals in the post-Mao reform era when the society was experiencing unprecedented transformation toward more democracy (of course, not in a linear way, as the 1989 incident had indicated). As Chinese scholars became more familiar with Tocqueville's ideas since the 1990s, we have seen a few direct applications of Tocquevillian categories to analyzing contemporary China in their accounts of "Democracy in China." In the following sections, I offer a critical review of the existing studies and point out the theoretical issues they have neglected or misrepresented.

## 2 Tocquevillian Analyses of "Democracy in China:" Optimism, Pessimism, and Oblivion

Drawing upon an important theme in Tocqueville's works, Wang Jianxun<sup>18</sup> singled out the problem of administrative centralization in modern China from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to nowadays, which he regarded as a principal obstacle to China's political democratization. The long history of China's expanding central government and the state extraction on local resources had rendered institutionalizing local liberty and citizen self-government at the grass-roots level a difficult task. At the same time, as a political scientist who had undertaken fieldworks to study the experiments of village elections in China (since the 1987 reform act), Wang saw propitious changes in Chinese democratic reform such as the growing political participation of Chinese peasants in the village governments, the strengthened local administrative and fiscal powers, and the improved quality of village governance due to the former factors. Wang also referred to a few encouraging signs such as the increasing number of civil associations and practices of grass-roots networks in the urban area. Citing Tocqueville's emphasis on the decentralized local self-government as the pillar of

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<sup>18</sup> Wang received his doctoral degree at Indiana University Blooming and studied with Vincent and Elinor Ostroms.

true democratic liberty, Wang displayed a hopeful vision about China's political development through a «democratic transformation from the bottom up»<sup>19</sup>.

As a Tocqueville expert, Chong Ming conveyed more nuanced messages about the spreading of the “equality of conditions” in contemporary China. Chong recognized that the democratic equality as defined by Tocqueville contained three aspects: 1) the majority of the social members shared more similar conditions of intelligence, education, property, and moral sentiments; 2) equal rights for everyone were enacted by the legal system; 3) equality as a moral value was approved by most people. Chong referred to empirical evidence to show that «equality ha[d] advanced on all three axes» in contemporary China. The economic reform since 1978 had produced a growing middle class and loosened the traditional class hierarchy in the society. Surveys suggested that contemporary Chinese residents indeed displayed a strong belief in equality as a basic value. However, as Tocqueville had pointed out, the spreading of equal social condition did not automatically result in the establishment of democratic self-government and the flourishing of political liberty. Equality of conditions was easily accompanied with growing individualization and isolation of the social members and the dependence on the centralized state power. Other moral challenges like the materialistic attitude to life, egoism, and political apathy would follow, as clearly recorded in the situation of contemporary China.

Unlike Wang Jianxun, Chong saw more of the weakness and limits in the experiment of local village (and township) elections. It had been «set up by the party-state primarily as a means to reinforce its shaky legitimacy, and not as an initiation of democratization in China»<sup>20</sup>. The communist party had a strong grip on the whole procedure of the election and imposed vital restrictions on the citizens' freedoms of campaign and voting<sup>21</sup>. «Without regular and authentic democratic practice, and supportive civic education about rights and duties, grassroots democracy in China cannot generate the results expected of a true democracy»<sup>22</sup>. As for the urban area, Chong admitted that civil associations and grass-roots social life were burgeoning. But he acutely grasped the Tocquevillian point that, without being combined with free political association which was strictly prohibited by the Chinese government, voluntary civil association, often strictly surveilled and suppressed, by itself was «not able to form a robust civil society which can eventually bring China into political

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<sup>19</sup> Wang, *The Road* cit., pp. 289.

<sup>20</sup> Chong, *Democracy* cit., p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> Also see R. Gannett, Jr., *Village-By-Village Democracy in China: What Seeds for Freedom?*, in *Tocqueville on China Project*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Chong, *Democracy* cit., p. 94.



democracy»<sup>23</sup>. Lastly, the “spectacular growth” of the Chinese Christian community (around 70 million in 2010 according to estimate) in recent decades might provide a beam of light for China’s political democratization, since Tocqueville had articulated on the mutual aid between the Christian religion and the practice of liberty in America. But according to Chong’s illustration, most Chinese Protestants practiced their belief in underground house churches (the government regarded as illegal) and were focused on their personal spiritual life. The majority of them would not be willing to openly engage their Christian belief with the dangerous public life in China. Except for a few Christian activists involved in the human rights movements that were brutally suppressed by the government, «the Chinese Christian and Protestant community [was] in general passive regarding the political transformation of China»<sup>24</sup>. In sum, Chong suggested that a Tocquevillian analysis of the social, political, and religious situations revealed «dim prospects for rapid democratization»<sup>25</sup> in China.

In a similar way to Chong’s analytical framework, the Chinese political theorist Ci Jiwei in his new book drew upon Tocqueville’s two-sided definition of democracy as both social condition and political regime to frame his overall argument about the prospect of China’s political democratization. Ci argued that, since the reform-era China had substantially progressed toward the equality of social conditions in many aspects, a transition to political democracy must be urgently matched to tackle with the emerging legitimacy crisis of the regime whose legitimation based on economic performance and communist ideology was quickly declining. Ci’s argument relied on a Tocquevillian rule of social and political development: «once equality of conditions (*l’égalité des conditions*) has come to prevail in a society, it will lead naturally, if not necessarily immediately, to the adoption of a democratic political regime»<sup>26</sup>. In this sense, Ci proposed a «prudential

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<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p. 95. It also echos Robert Gannett’s critique of the “social capital” theory’s partial appropriation of Tocqueville, see R. Gannett, Jr., *Bowling Ninepins in Tocqueville’s Township*, in «The American Political Science Review», 97 (2003), n. 1, pp. 1-16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> *Infra*.

<sup>26</sup> Ci, *Democracy* cit., p. 106. Also see p.116: «Once equality of conditions has become a fact of life in a society, there comes about a natural and powerful momentum toward a democratic political system, a momentum that will not cease until the goal is reached, although it is impossible to say how long it will take to reach the goal and what exact form its arrival will take. ... A crucial part of this momentum, one might add, comes from the fact that equality of conditions, as understood by Tocqueville, is not merely an empirical fact. Over time, through being affirmed and valorized by those fighting to gain or entrench this condition, it becomes also a moral fact, as it were, inspiring its own expansion into all relevant aspects of human life. Democracy – that is, political democracy – is an all too natural step of this expansion.»

approach» to democratic reform that he believed would appear reasonable and convincing to the Chinese leadership – the Tocquevillian rule demanded the Communist Party leaders launch the reform as soon as possible for the viability of their regime. Ci’s argument aroused strong controversies among commentators. Some political scientists questioned whether Ci provided enough evidence about the mature conditions for China’s transformation to liberal democracy. Some regarded his attempt to persuade the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to give up its dominant status and embrace democratic reform as unrealistic, or as the Chinese saying put it: negotiating with a tiger for its pelt<sup>27</sup>. I find Ci’s well-studied volume contained many prescient diagnoses of the situation in contemporary China. However, my principal reservation about Ci’s argument is that his application of the so-called Tocqueville rule had not fully grasped the latter’s complex perspective.

Ci’s application of Tocqueville’s concept of democracy did not pay enough attention to the latter’s discussion on a new form of “democratic despotism” in the age of equality (*Democracy in America*, 1840 Volume, Part 4). As Tocqueville articulated there, the equalization of social structure also accompanied a natural tendency of concentration of powers in the sovereign state. The breakdown of traditional hierarchical ties had produced not merely more equal but also more isolated individuals who in the face of the enormous power of the state were more likely to accept their dependent and subordinated status. Tocqueville thus offered a severe caveat for the loss of the spirit of freedom and the declining capacity for self-government under the new combined condition of equalization and centralization. Drawing upon this theoretical diagnosis by Tocqueville, I find that Ci’s analysis had understated the viability of the Chinese authoritarian state in the age of democratic equality and underestimated the challenges on the road to political liberty in China. Whether the modern equality would proceed with liberty or despotism was actually an unsettled question according to Tocqueville’s illumination. Chong Ming, in contrast, addressed Tocqueville’s caveat for the problem of democratic despotism and related it to the situation of China in the final part of his paper. However, his application of Tocqueville’s idea was still not meticulous enough in accurately grasping the rich nuances in Tocqueville’s own account.

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<sup>27</sup> A. Nathan, review of Ci’s book, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/andrew-j-nathan>, 2020.

### 3. Clarifying Tocqueville's Idea of Democratic Despotism

Chong rightly noticed Tocqueville's analysis of how the combination of social equality and growing individualism would facilitate the rise of a centralized "tutelary state" that posed the danger of a new form of despotism in the democratic era. I agree to his application of the category of democratic despotism to the assessing the authoritarian regime in China today: «For Tocqueville, the democratic social state can lead either to political liberty or despotism. It is the authoritarian alternative which is more likely in today's China»<sup>28</sup>. According to Chong, the Chinese government, reigning over the equal individuals who were discouraged or rather prevented from free participation in public affairs and were immersed in the pursuit of material interests, seemed to «have no other purpose than to construct this Tocquevillian tutelary state»<sup>29</sup>. However, when Chong further envisioned the possible future development of Chinese politics by analyzing the dynamic and nature of the democratic despotism, he displayed a few inaccuracies and inconsistencies in utilizing Tocqueville's theoretical perspectives.

First, Chong held an over-simplified understanding of the dynamic of the democratic despotism in Tocqueville's account: «Tocqueville argues that the new democratic despotism cannot last; it will either be replaced by free institutions or end up with a single master's tyrannical rule»<sup>30</sup>. Here Chong referred to the last paragraph in Part 4, Chapter 6 of the 1840 volume of *Democracy in America*.

A constitution that would be republican at the head, and ultra-monarchical in all the other parts has always seemed to me an ephemeral monster. The vices of those who govern and the imbecility of the governed would not take long to lead them to ruin; and the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, would create freer institutions, or would soon return to stretching out at the feet of a single master.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, here Tocqueville was not concluding on the instability of democratic despotism *in general*, but indicating a *particular form* of it. Tocqueville had mentioned earlier that there were «different forms that democratic despotism could take»<sup>32</sup> and in the following part he chose to examine the particular kind in which «the sovereign is elected or closely supervised by a legislature truly elected and independent» (as different from the other types like the one that put the sovereign power «in the hands of an unaccountable man or

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<sup>28</sup> Chong, *Democracy* cit., p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> *Infra*.

<sup>31</sup> A. Tocqueville, E. Nolla (ed.), J. Schleifer (trans.), *Democracy in America*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, pp. 1260-61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1256.

body»<sup>33</sup>. This kind of constitution, although having the national supreme power formed through electoral representation, still tended to concentrate the administrative power in the hands of a tutelary state and exclude ordinary citizens from directly managing the everyday «small (public) affairs». It was for this reason Tocqueville warned that the people would risk «losing little by little the ability to think, to feel and to act by themselves, and from thus falling gradually below the level of humanity»<sup>34</sup>. (1259) Therefore, this regime was born with a seed of fundamental instability in its body, because with the «compromise between administrative despotism and sovereignty of the people», it would require the citizens who «have given up the habit of directing themselves» to make good choice for competent leaders, and would suppose a «liberal , energetic and wise government» to «come out of the votes of a people of servants»<sup>35</sup> – a self-defeating cause. Then Tocqueville concluded on its likely change to freer institutions or collapse into the tyranny of a single master.

Here Tocqueville did not refer to the government of a specific country when he described the new democratic despotism. Scholars (since John Stuart Mill’s review) have long pointed out that the 1840 volume *Democracy in America* was more theoretical and abstract about the general trend in the age of democratic equality than the 1835 volume which was focused on the case of the American democracy. The discussion in the 1840 volume often combined Tocqueville’s observation on the reality in Europe and America with his prescient theoretical speculations on the general, often uncrystallized, trend in the new era. The particular form of democratic despotism – an unstable combination of popular sovereignty and administrative despotism – discussed above was apparently different from how Tocqueville characterized the government of the United States. Probably he was alluding to the development of governments in Europe, especially that of France, which was witnessing the electoral politics and representative government taking root since the 18<sup>th</sup> century while preserving its tradition of administrative centralization. But again, it might be more proper to say that Tocqueville was also imagining an *ideal theoretical type* when he articulated the traits and vices of this form of “elected” democratic despotism. Since Chong Ming did not distinguish between this particular form and the democratic despotism in general, we are not exactly sure about which category he was applying to the current Chinese regime. Apparently, China does not have a constitution that was “republican at the head, and ultra- monarchical in all the other parts,” since Chong himself made it clear that the Chinese communist regime never had an authentic election of a national representative government since its foundation. Chong had not

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<sup>33</sup> *Infra*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1259.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1260.

clarified why the Chinese party-state would also suffer the innate instability of the “ephemeral monster” in Tocqueville’s account.

Chong also made another argument about the “self-destructive” nature of the democratic tutelary state. He turned to Tocqueville’s another masterpiece *The Old Regime* to explain how the overly administrative centralization of the French absolute monarchy had produced the perils for itself. First, the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus was always a hotbed of ineptitude, undeserved privileges, and corruption, which would easily incur discontent and resistance. Second, since the centralized administrative state empowered itself at the cost of debilitating the local autonomy and expropriating the social resources, «no social force could be organized to support it when a crisis broke out»<sup>36</sup>. These factors explained the doom of the old regime which could also be regarded as form of despotic state in the age of rising equality of conditions. Chong, therefore, drew a relevant lesson about the similar likelihood of self-doom of the current Chinese statist system. However, while Chong was right in presenting the death story of the French monarchical state in Tocqueville’s account, he forgot to mention the other half of the story about the haunting ghost of the centralized state after 1789. The French old regime was not succeeded by free democratic polity but by another form of popular-democratic despotism in the revolution and further followed by the tyranny of one master. In this sense, the long-term resilience of modern democratic despotism was reflected in the likely shifting between its different forms and the returning of the centralized state apparatus throughout crises and revolutions.

After clarifying a few of Chong’s flawed rendering of the concept of democratic despotism, we may be tempted to ask whether and in what sense this idea of Tocqueville is still an analytical category applicable to the current Chinese regime. I argue that it is indeed fitting because the genesis of modern Chinese sovereign state corroborates the generative mechanism of the new despotism in the age of equality of conditions as Tocqueville described. From a longer historical perspective, the Chinese society underwent a similar process of the decline of feudal aristocracy and a growing dominating power of the central government. The introduction of the Western framework of the sovereign state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century further facilitated the individualization of the social structure and enhanced the social members’ dependance on the state power. Furthermore, the current Chinese post-totalitarian, authoritarian regime displays many features of the tutelary state in the democratic age – as «an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate», and an

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<sup>36</sup> Chong, *Democracy* cit., p. 105. For example, the failure to deal with the agricultural crisis and the peasants’ grievances at the end stage of the French old regime. See *Old Regime*, Book 2, Chapter 12.

«absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild» authoritarian power that does not respect the citizens as the source of its fiduciary power but dwarfs them to permanent childhood, like a shepherd surveilling and managing «a flock of timid and industrious animals»<sup>37</sup>. To clarify, it is the democratic despotism in general, or perhaps the “worst” particular form that has all the powers concentrated «in the hands of an unaccountable man or body»<sup>38</sup> as briefly mentioned by Tocqueville that better fits the present situation in China. As Tocqueville himself did not explicitly conclude on the «impossibility of long-term success» (Chong Ming’s phrase) of the democratic despotism in general (unlike the elected form which was an «ephemeral monster»), we also should not underestimate the viability and resilience of the current Chinese regime and the challenges for redirecting it to liberal democracy.

#### 4. The Genesis of Democratic Despotism in China

Largely corroborating Tocqueville’s characterization of the late Chinese empire as a model of leveled society under a centralized government without political freedom, the Chinese historian Qian Mu (2001 [1952]) delineated how the Chinese political system during its evolution since the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD)<sup>39</sup> had kept concentrating powers in the central government, debilitating the landed aristocracy, and diminishing the local autonomy, ultimately creating a «flattened» and impotent society<sup>40</sup>. Political scientist Wang Yuhua recently drew upon a rich set of historical data to explain the patterns of the Chinese state development over the last two millennia. He provided new evidence about the decisive «state-strengthening» in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) and the slow and stable progress of «state-maintaining» in the following millennia<sup>41</sup>. Due to the civil wars and foreign interventions, the central government’s control over local areas experienced a decline from mid the 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But that turned out to be a short interlude out of the rule. As Wang Jianxun showed in his article, China had witnessed a «deliberate and far-ranging trend toward centralization of power in building a modern and strong state»<sup>42</sup> from the Republic of China era (1911-1949) to nowadays.

<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy* cit., pp. 1250, 1252.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1256.

<sup>39</sup> In the field of Chinese historiography, there is a famous discussion on the decisive social and political transformation during the Tang and Song dynasties, known as the Tang-Song Transition.

<sup>40</sup> M. Qian, Mu, *Zhongguo lidai zhengzhi deshi* (*The political gains and losses of the Chinese dynasties*), Beijing, Shenghuo-dushu-xinzhishi Sanlian Press, 2001, pp. 170-173

<sup>41</sup> Y. Wang, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022, pp. 30-32.

<sup>42</sup> Wang, *The Road* cit., p. 273.

Considering the long-term Chinese historical transformation mentioned above, Tocqueville actually acutely grasped China's situation when he said «in China ... equality of conditions is very great and very ancient» and when he recognized the centralized administration in China which might even be «the most beautiful model ... in the universe», even though he did not have more in-depth information to examine the Chinese example<sup>43</sup>. China could have been a good case for Tocqueville to illustrate his theoretical model of democratic despotism. As Tocqueville stated, in the Christian nations the progress toward equality of condition started about “seven hundred years ago» preceding the 1800s, when the feudal aristocracy declined from their peaking status, the middle class rose in the society, and the monarchs concentrated their powers and expanded the administrative offices. China in fact had a similar pattern of social and political transformation, but along a different timeline. The model of the centralized monarchy with a uniform administrative bureaucracy was emerging in the late Warring States Era (403-221 BC) and took its definite shape when the Qin state first unified China (221-206 BC). The institution of local feudal principalities regained its predominance since the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) for about a thousand years, until the decisive Tang-Song Transition when the powerful landed aristocratic class/families stopped to exist. However, a difference of the Imperial China compared to the democratic age in Tocqueville's West was that the notion of hierarchy and subordination (e.g., in familial and political relationships) had been deep-rooted in the Chinese society and culture. But when modern notions of equality and popular rights were introduced to China since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no better hotbed for the new democratic despotism to emerge in a long-time “flattened” social structure ruled by the “most beautiful” model of a top-down bureaucratic complex with two thousand years' history.

In 1949, the CCP took over and restored the centralized administrative apparatus from relics of the monarchical empire and the civil wars. In the name of the sovereign power of the people, the communist regime launched innumerable political campaigns that overhauled the traditional ties in Chinese society and reorganized individual residents into a uniform system of party-controlled urban “work units” (*danwei*) and rural “communes.” Borrowing Tocqueville's insight about the emergence of a tutelary state and a new “soft despotism” in the age of equality, I will move on to illustrate how the institution of *danwei* (existing from the Mao era into nowadays) had created a condition of dependence and isolation among the Chinese people by subordinating them to the centralized authority and deterring their mutual collaboration.

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<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy* cit., pp. 1123, 154.

## 5. Centralization and Dependence: A Tutelary State in Practice

After abolishing the capitalist private ownership in the 1950s and monopolizing the ruling power in all spheres of the society, the CCP established the danwei system which recruited Chinese citizens to work in the public sector like the military, government departments, media, hospitals, schools, and state-owned industrial enterprises. In communist China, danwei meant both the workplace and living space, the two of which were usually constructed and managed together. Nominally touting the leadership of the ordinary “working class” members and “intra-party democracy,” the danwei was in reality managed in a hierarchical and centralized manner under the few party leaders of each unit, embedded into the complex hierarchy of the CCP’s national organization itself<sup>44</sup>.

The Chinese danwei system shared characteristics with other soviet countries’ socialist models and also developed its own peculiarities. Compared to the less organized peasants in the rural areas (villages communes) and the freelancing laborers, urban danwei employees enjoyed more secured state-distributed benefits including wages, housing, food quota, health care, and other forms of welfare that almost covered the life-span from “cradle to grave,” despite the average condition of scarcity before the 1980s<sup>45</sup>. But there was also the moral and political price the danwei employees paid for their admission into the party-dominated organizations. Scholars have highlighted the danwei employees’ socio-economic dependence on their units and political subjugation to the party leaders<sup>46</sup>. What is more, with the attack on autonomous civil society and the traditional religious life, even the private spiritual and moral life of the danwei members was under strict scrutiny by the party in the daily life. Their freedom of mind was further diminished through the public pledging and “reeducation of the mind” in the constant, mandatory ideological campaigns. All in all, the party-worker relationship in the danwei can be compared to a “pastoral-flock” power relationship – using Foucault’s term – which moves beyond the network of material interests and goes deeper to the sphere of spiritual manipulation<sup>47</sup>.

Compared to the Soviet Union, the Chinese danwei system was less institutionalized and more precarious, largely due to the numerous disruptive political movements launched by Mao Zedong from 1950s to 1970s. Factors like the traditional Confucian collectivism and the party’s emphasis on the “mass line” (in the name of serving and

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<sup>44</sup> A. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 8-27.

<sup>45</sup> See D. Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 197.

<sup>46</sup> Walder, *Communist* cit. pp. 8-27; G. Henderson – M. Cohen, *The Chinese Hospital: A Socialist Work Unit*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 140.

<sup>47</sup> Bray, *Social* cit., pp. 59-60, 119-120.



empowering the grassroots members) also rendered the cadre-worker clientelist relationship in Chinese danwei less uniform, more personal, and even more reciprocal<sup>48</sup>. But beside the peculiar developments, the danwei system in China indicated the typical features of the Leninist party-state such as centralization of governmental power, subordination throughout the party hierarchy, and the political subjugation and economic dependence of the citizens. Danwei had in the end become a defining identity for the Chinese urban residents. As Elisabeth Perry lively noted, in communist China, the question «Where are you from?» pointed principally not to the regional location of your hometown but the danwei you belonged to, like «I'm from the Number 17 cotton mill» (Wo di-17 shachang) or «I'm from the Bank of China» (Wo Zhongguoyinhang)<sup>49</sup>.

A society (re)constructed and managed through the mediator of the danwei system produced two extreme sides: an all-powerful state and the dependent, subject, powerless individual citizens. The socialist planned economy granted the government the sole role in determining the production and distribution of all the resources (material and also immaterial such as information) in the society. But the economic inefficiency of centralized planning and the constant turmoil of political movements had brought the Chinese society to a condition of severe poverty and scarcity by the time of Mao's death in 1976. Limited by lack of resources, individual citizens' sphere of freedom was further curtailed by their confinement in the danwei. There was not much time and space left for the employees outside the highly disciplined work-life circle in the danwei. Individuals' coordination for any purpose outside the party's supervision was regarded as dangerous and reactionary. Citizens' condition of subordination and dependence in the danwei were further coupled with their mutual isolation.

The communist danwei system established in the Mao era has kept its imprint on the Chinese society in the subsequent decades of reform even when the private sector – market economy and civil society – is allowed to exist and grow. First, the CCP has kept the danwei system, with its top-down party-authority structure, largely intact in the state-violence institutions such as the government branches, police, and military. Second, despite the significant rise of the private economy sector (allegedly contributing more than 50% of the GDP nowadays) and the influx of foreign investment, the party-controlled state-owned-enterprises have survived the reforms in the 1990s and have again become the dominant economic force in the society by monopolizing the key industries like

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<sup>48</sup> Ivi, pp. 196-197.

<sup>49</sup> E. Perry, *From Native Place to Workplace: Labor Origins and Outcomes of China's Danwei System*, in E. Perry-X. Lu (ed.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, pp. 42-59, 42.

energy, banking, and engineering<sup>50</sup>. In a word, the Chinese party-state is still able to concentrate most of the power and resource in the society for its own use. As scholars like Robert Dahl have emphasized, a “pluralistic social order” where resources like wealth, skills, and information were widely dispersed across the society was key to the emergence and survival of (liberal) democratic regime. In contrast, «[r]esource concentration is a recipe for autocracy. Where the state monopolizes the main sources of wealth and income, citizens depend on the government for resources – jobs, income, housing, loans, contracts—that are essential to their livelihoods. Governments can exploit this dependence by denying rivals and critics access to much-needed resources (while offering favorable access to loyalists)»<sup>51</sup>.

The Chinese government has been aptly utilizing its resources to coopt subservient citizens and also suppress dissenters. The number of the citizens employed outside the government’s direct control is indeed growing, but their economic and independent status is still limited. Even though many state-owned-enterprises have been reformed in the model of the Western corporation, they are ultimately in the charge of the party organizations which treat the employees like subordinates in the danwei. And as Michael Walzer noted, even in the democratic societies, the many corporate bodies like big companies and organizations were run in a centralized, undemocratic way, sometimes like «a miniature police state»<sup>52</sup>. The authoritarian nature is only enhanced by that the Chinese state-owned-enterprises and even private enterprises (the government has recently required party branches to be established in them) cannot evade the command of the party-state. With the resource concentrated in the hands of the state and the citizens’ dependence on it, the Chinese authoritarian regime, in the shadow of the danwei system, has viably persisted at various levels of the society.

A recent case can shed light on the weakness of the civic society and the dominant power of the state – the Chinese state-society relationship seen in the responding practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. As observers have recorded, in the beginning stage of the virus breakout in Wuhan, when the government had yet devised a comprehensive tactic to respond to the situation, local citizens relied on a wide range of volunteer “civic organizing” by themselves to survive the crisis<sup>53</sup>. They formed online and offline communication groups, coordinated the purchase and distribution of groceries and

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<sup>50</sup> Fewsmith, *China* cit., pp. 262-267.

<sup>51</sup> S. Levitsky *et al.*, *Democracy’s Surprising Resilience*, in «Journal of Democracy», 34 (2023), n. 4, pp. 5-20, 10.

<sup>52</sup> M. Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 37. In fact, the soviet factory work-unit had been partly modelled on the Western factory towns emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>53</sup> G. Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown*, New York, Columbia University, 2022, pp. 111-134.

medical goods, pooled transportation means to transfer patients and commute to workplace, and offered various forms of aids and comforts to each other. But the highly imbalanced statuses of the Chinese state and civil society soon led the domination of affairs to the former. A key institutional venue that the Chinese government used to implement the lockdown and relevant policies (quarantine, mandatory testing, and distribution of goods) was the “grid governance” network that was attached to the local CCP government branches (namely, a form of *danwei*) at the street and residential community level. Cooperating with homeowner associations and property management companies, the semi-official “grid” coordinators were in charge of various public affairs from welfare distribution to surveillance, security watch, and disputes settlement. When necessary, they would exercise official authority granted by the police department and superior government officials. In theory, the grid governance network was to facilitate the self-governance of the community residents. «In reality, it is a mechanism for the deeper penetration of the party–state into citizens’ lives»<sup>54</sup>.

In the lockdown, most of the citizens’ volunteer actions were subject to the permission and supervision of the government (starting from the grid level) and later totally reliant on the provision of goods from the government since free movements, market, and transportations were all suspended. With the government taking over and backed by its coercive power, the pandemic policies were implemented in a top-down, centralized, rigid manner, e.g. the digital color code system used to surveil citizens’ activities and movements. The notorious scene was that the grid coordinators, local officials, and police could intrude into the residents’ homes to enforce quarantine, testing, and sanitization. Not occasionally, they would forcefully transfer the residents of an entire community from their homes to the highly disciplined quarantine centers, in order to realize the “zero-case” goal. The strict lockdown of communities and cities, first in Wuhan and later applied nationwide for the sake of zero-case had persisted from 2020 into 2022. The coercive and rigid policy implementation had caused many human tragedies by separating family members and preventing in-time aids. The Chinese society had been deeply traumatized by the inhuman treatments and the loss of freedom. The zero-case policy also decimated Chinese economy by disrupting domestic production and alienating foreign business. A tutelary state that claimed to “take care of” the people turned out to be highly hurtful and oppressive by depriving the citizens’ liberties and suffocating the activism in the society.

## 6. The New Democratic Despotism: Both Soft and Hard

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<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, p. 52.

For Tocqueville, the despotism emerging under the democratic condition of modern times was so unprecedented, that he could not properly name it but only try to imagine and grasp the features. In Tocqueville's characterization, this new democratic despotism took shape as a "tutelary power" that was asserted primarily not in a violent and forceful but "mild" and "soft" manner. It worked "willingly" for the citizens' happiness, on the condition that it was the only agent that monopolized the right to take charge. Most of its job was to «attend to [the citizens'] security, provide for their needs, facilitate their pleasures, conduct their principal affairs, direct their industry, settle their estates, and divide their inheritances»<sup>55</sup>. The effect it exerted on the citizens' souls was that «it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd»<sup>56</sup>. The people might entertain an external, superficial form of liberty but in fact fell deep into a «regulated, mild, and peaceful» servitude.

We have discussed how the Chinese society, resonating with Tocqueville's analysis, had undergone its own process to the "equality of conditions" in the preceding centuries and had also been susceptible to a centralized state power reigning over the flattened and enervated social body. Scholars like Chong Ming and Ci Jiwei thus found it suitable to apply Tocqueville's nuanced theoretical account of equality to the analysis of contemporary Chinese society. I want to add that the current CCP authoritarian regime also displays features in accordance with Tocqueville's caveats about the soft democratic despotism in the age of equality. In the post-Mao era of reform, the party-state has emphasized the economic development as the "center" of its mission – a doctrine brought up by Deng Xiaoping. It can be admitted that the Chinese government in the recent four decades has evaded from being immersed in political implosion and mass murders, and instead shifted its attention to promoting socio-economic progress: it directs the expansion of industries, building of infrastructure, growth of crop production, research in sciences and technologies, and, though not ideally, protection of environment. It "willingly" attends to the "happiness" of the Chinese people, with the condition that it monopolizes the leading status in this mission and receives the primary credit in the name of "serving the people." The party's leadership cannot be questioned or abandoned. In this sense, the Chinese citizens are granted the material benefits and some forms of civil liberties, but still highly restricted in their political rights. This is why some people have called the current Chinese regime a "development" or

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<sup>55</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy* cit., p. 1251.

<sup>56</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1252.

“responsive” authoritarianism<sup>57</sup>. As some scholars point out, authoritarian regimes do not merely “tyrannize,” but also “govern” more or less effectively, which wins them sincere support of the citizens<sup>58</sup>. The Chinese authoritarian government today is indeed more “softened” and more “caring” compared to the communist age under Mao.

At the same time, the current Chinese regime also takes political heritage from its history of communism, a phenomenon Tocqueville could not have fully predicted. In the daily social life under the planning government, there were aspects that accorded with Tocqueville’s metaphor of “shepherd-flock” tutelary management – a more or less mild, routinized, authoritarian governance – as we saw in the Chinese citizens’ condition of life in the danwei system. But the Soviet regimes like Mao’s China, in different ways, shared Stalin’s totalitarian style of rule that had not shied from employing forms of extreme violence under circumstances, especially in the fighting against the “class enemies.” Tocqueville’s brief brushing on the novel phenomenon of the democratic despotism in the last part of *Democracy in America* was tentative, theoretical, and non-exhaustive. Tocqueville’s highlighting of the novel “soft” features does not mean that he was blind to the possible brutal violence in modern tyrannies, considering how his family had suffered during the Reign of Terror. But after all he was only a harbinger theorist, not a superhuman prophet. In discussing the particular case of modern China, we can supplement his account of democratic despotism with more updated understandings of the twentieth-century extreme politics.

A theoretical perspective that bears relevance and semblance to Tocqueville’s ideas is Hannah Arendt’s profound analysis of totalitarianism under Hitler and Stalin. As Roger Boesche has illustrated, Arendt and Tocqueville similarly identified the factors that paved the ground for the unprecedented modern tyranny, such as the condition of individual isolation in a levelling social structure, people’s submergence in materialism, pervasive political apathy, and intellectual inertia, and finally their surrendering to the centralized, all-powerful political authority<sup>59</sup>. But the twentieth-century totalitarianism also developed new forms of tyrannical rule beyond Tocqueville’s characterizations of the democratic despotism. Arendt clearly laid out how the unprecedented organizational power of the political party in mobilizing the mass movement was the driving force of totalitarianism. And at the head of the party, there was a supreme Leader who was not only making key decisions but was “totally responsible” in the sense that his domination penetrated into every aspect of the

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<sup>57</sup> C. Heurlin, *Responsive Authoritarianism in China: Land, Protests, and Policy Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> A. Przeworski, *Formal Models of Authoritarian Regimes: A Critique*, in «Perspectives on Politics», 21 (2023), n. 3, 979-988.

<sup>59</sup> R. Boesche, *Tocqueville and Arendt on the Novelty of Modern Tyranny*, in P. Lawler et al. (ed.), *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, New York, Garland Publishing Inc., 1993, pp. 157-175.

totalitarian movement. «This total responsibility is the most important organizational aspect of the so-called Leader principle, according to which every functionary is not only appointed by the Leader but is his walking embodiment, and every order is supposed to emanate from this one ever-present source»<sup>60</sup>. The roles of the organized party and the single leader in the modern tyrannical rule were largely elusive in Tocqueville's account.

The most peculiar trait characteristic of the extreme madness and violence of the totalitarian rule, as Arendt incisively diagnosed in the last part of her book, was the ideological terror that totalitarianism imposed on the entire society. The ideological “law of movement” was the life and essence of totalitarian movements, as seen in how Nazism enforced its “law of racial nature” and Communism implemented its “law of the history of class struggles” through extreme violence. But as Arendt suggested, the exact content of the “laws” – the mythical or “scientific” theories of race and economic history – was less consequential than the “process” of realizing the law. «What distinguished these new ideologists [i.e., Stalin and Hitler] from their predecessors was that it was no longer primarily the ‘idea’ of the ideology – the struggle of the classes and the exploitation of the workers or the struggle of races and the care for Germanic people – which appealed to them, but the logical process which could be developed from it»<sup>61</sup>. Totalitarian movements were marching by straightjacketing the real world into the “iron logic” of their prime Laws. Since there were always disparities between the ideological reasoning and the imperfect realities, the movement of molding and transforming the world was a dynamic process and would keep going at all costs. Arendt stressed that this rule of ideological reasoning was a “total terror” because it aimed to eliminate «not only freedom in any specific sense, but the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make a new beginning»<sup>62</sup>. Submerged in the rule of ideological reasoning, individual human beings’ capacity of independent agency and spontaneous actions would be crushed and decimated since the Law could not allow defying wills and course of actions at odds with its command. In this sense, ideological rule was «dominating and terrorizing human beings from within»<sup>63</sup>. Traditional tyrannies ruled over human beings, while totalitarianism worked earnestly to reduce human beings to something below, a human form without moral essence. Tocqueville had recognized that in the democratic age historians would prefer general causes to individual efforts in explaining the course of events. (*Democracy in America*, 1840 volume, Part I, Chapter 20) But he had not exactly seen how these general

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<sup>60</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism (New Edition with Added Prefaces)*, New York, A Harvest Book Harcourt Inc., 1976, p. 374.

<sup>61</sup> *Ivi*, p. 472.

<sup>62</sup> *Ivi*, p. 466.

<sup>63</sup> *Ivi*, p. 325.

rules of history would one day become the dominating force of the new despotic rule that destroyed human liberty.

Arendt's characterizations of totalitarianism were based on her careful examination of the ruling logic and extreme crimes under Hitler and Stalin. It is arguable whether other Fascist and Communist regimes like Mao's China could be neatly fitted into Arendt's quintessential model of totalitarianism<sup>64</sup>. But it is clear that ideological campaigns based on the Marxian-Leninist law of history had always been a core part of the Chinese communist movement, and a rule of terror was not insignificant in the series of infightings, purges, and executions. During the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942-1945), Mao Zedong had already attained the dominant status and devised a set of complex tactics to have party members go through a process of ideological "purification," if not execution. The means of "rectifying" political opponents included organized critiques, forced public confession, and when the movement oftentimes went hyper-charged, employing various forms of oral, physical, and mental violence and abuses<sup>65</sup>. The goal was to make everyone embrace Mao's authority and ideological principles without moral equivocation. When the CCP took power after 1949, these methods of ideological struggle were applied to different groups of class enemies such as the landowners (series of Suppression Movements in early 1950s), bourgeois enterprisers and liberal intellectuals (the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957), and in the end everyone in power Mao held as suspect threat to his status and his obdurate decisions (the Cultural Revolution starting in 1966). As scholars have agreed, these political movements were motivated both by Mao's personal consideration to secure his power status and by his sincere ideological beliefs<sup>66</sup>. This ideological politics exerted profound terror not only in the violent harms and death toll it caused, but also lying in its fundamental disavowal of the basic human right to make independent judgment and launch actions with free will – the natality and spontaneity that comprised the essence of all human freedoms.

Communist ideological fever had indeed receded since Mao's death. The CCP's official ideology had also adapted to the changing circumstances by incorporating elements outside the orthodox Marxist-Leninism, such as Chinese nationalism and traditional cultural values<sup>67</sup>. At the same time, suppressive political campaigning in the name of the "ideological

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<sup>64</sup> J. Isaac, *Critics of Totalitarianism*, in T. Ball et al. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 181-201.

<sup>65</sup> H. Gao, et al., *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930-1945*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> See Y. Song et al. (ed.), *China and the Maoist Legacy: The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cultural Revolution*, Hong Kong, Mirror Books, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> But a grand discourse on the Law of History has always been presented, for example, the CCP's new historical mission under the slogan of "the Chinese nation's great rejuvenation" as raised by Xi Jinping.

correct” is very much a distinctive feature of the current Chinese regime compared to other authoritarian governments without the communist legacy. The CCP has kept a large institutional organ of ideological work and devoted enormous resources to the indoctrination of official-approved ideas in schools and the propaganda targeted at the general public. What is more, direct and indirect coercion has been employed in the numerous ideological campaigns like the “Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Movement” in 1986 and the recent “Anti-Historical Nihilism” censorship under Xi Jinping, not to mention the constant “study” and “education” conferences within the party<sup>68</sup>. They were launched to make the official discourse about everything – from the study and understanding about historical events to positions and judgments on current social and political issues – prevail in the society while suppressing critical and differing views. Censoring and shutting off dissenting opinions is only the first step of warning. Police harassment, arrest, and jailing would ruthlessly fall to the most intractable souls<sup>69</sup>. The official ideological doctrines of the CCP leadership may adjust and shift, but the forceful ideological campaigns keep marching and affecting everyone in the society. It attests to Arendt’s insight that the ongoing “process” of ideological movement is more consequential than the specific “ideas.” Ideological campaigns are not about convincing the public in the free competition of the market of ideas, but using force and coercion to dominate the body and mind. Making the subject citizens unable and unwilling to think for themselves is the goal of the ideological suppression, as Tocqueville had rightly imagined. But the means it adopts are much “harder” than Tocqueville’s depiction. The terror of ideological politics is not only its suppression on the particular freedoms of thought, speech, and the press, but its fundamental obstruction of individual autonomy and agency by spreading a fear of thinking and “beginning something new” in actions – in a sense, “terrorizing from within.” Tocqueville and Arendt’s converging and differing accounts complement each other in capturing the nature and moral evils of the post-communist authoritarian regime in contemporary China.

## 7. Beyond Despotism and the Beam of Liberty

This paper has illustrated why adopting Tocqueville’s analytical category “democratic despotism” can help us properly grasp the illiberal nature of the current Chinese authoritarian regime which has its roots in recent and distant pasts. But it is not to say that this concept can exhaust and characterize all aspects of the complex situation in contemporary Chinese society. A discourse of “doomed to despotism” would be simplistic,

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<sup>68</sup> Li, *The Making* cit., pp. 24, 134.

<sup>69</sup> For the recent crackdown on human rights activists, see Ivi, pp. 129-139.



fatalist, and irresponsible. This is also not Tocqueville's purpose of introducing this idea. After illuminating the mechanism of the new democratic despotism, Tocqueville suggests the tactics to counteract the dangerous trenchant of the entanglement of equality and servitude, for the sake of «making liberty emerge from within the democratic society in which God makes us live»<sup>70</sup>. They include strengthening the “secondary bodies” between the state and the individual citizens that were formed through various types of associations, securing the freedom of the press that communicates and ties individuals' minds, and keeping the institutional “formalities” (like the independent judicial power) that guard individual rights against shifting social tides. The foremost theoretical lesson from Tocqueville is that the participatory, associative actions of committed citizens comprise the essence and most important safeguard of the true political liberty. These antidotes to democratic despotism as suggested by Tocqueville can also help us understand the certain propitious developments of Chinese society in the recent decades and point to the path ahead in the future.

Admitting the dominating status of the CCP in China, we may wonder how China had moved out of the totalitarian age under Mao and achieved the socio-economic progress in the recent decades. The most significant difference between the two periods is apparently the introduction of the market economy since the 1980s, culminated in China's admission to WTO in 2001 that launched the economic boom thereafter. Liberal commentators might still highlight the widely existing human rights suppression by the CCP government and light-brush the meaning of the more economic liberty Chinese people have attained. Left critics would lament for the consequences of the growing economic inequality and the mindset of commoditizing everything under the “neo-liberal” order<sup>71</sup>. Admitting the validity of these critical perspectives, I suggest we still valorize the significant changes in the reform era by understanding how the totalitarian despotism had been “softened” and also partially limited by the institutionalizing of economic freedom.

It is ambiguous whether Tocqueville's category of civil association could directly apply to or be consistent with the market activities<sup>72</sup>. On the one hand, the fervent associating actions – based not primarily on selfless virtues but “self-interests rightly understood” – among the Americans that Tocqueville acclaimed apparently included the central role of the commerce in their daily life. He also defended private property and raised severe critiques about socialism as a form of economic order dependent on and dominated by the

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<sup>70</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy* cit., p. 1264.

<sup>71</sup> For an example of the critical views, see D. Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> R. Behr-V. Storr, *Tocquevillean Association and Market*, in R. Boyd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 278-305, 279.

government. Therefore, Tocqueville largely approved the right of free economic actions. On the other hand, Tocqueville's suspicion to bourgeois self-interestedness and materialism and his recognition of the working class's hardship also indicated his reservations about the moral and political consequences of the modern commercial life. Highlighting more on political and civil associations for non-profit purposes, Tocqueville had not fully explored the importance of the spontaneous economic activities in preserving the modern liberty as other classical liberals like Adam Smith did. In terms of understanding the relationship between economic liberty and modern despotism, including totalitarianism, we can turn to another thinker's elaboration which has been inspired by Tocqueville but also offers more in-depth examination.

Friedrich A. Hayek in *The Road to Servitude* has acknowledged much credit, as seen in the cover page's quote and even the title itself, to Tocqueville's prophetic caveats about the decline of individual liberty under the state's centralized power. Hayek, as an economist, illustrates on how market competition through the price signals provides an effective way of coordinating individuals' "spontaneous" efforts and utilizing social resources. But this book delivers a more important "political" message: «political freedom is meaningless without economic freedom» – here economic freedom meaning not the freedom from economic concerns as the socialist planners promise us, but the indispensable «freedom of our economic activity which, with the right of choice, inevitably also carries the risk and the responsibility of that right»<sup>73</sup>. Market competition is a superior rule of social organization «not only because it is in most circumstances the most efficient method known, but even more because it is the only method by which our activities can be adjusted to each other without coercive or arbitrary intervention of authority»<sup>74</sup>. In contrast, Hayek emphatically points out how the economic "collectivism" – top-down centralized planning – would undermine the rule of law and democratic self-government, paving the road for the totalitarian rule in Nazis Germany and Soviet Union. Responding to the critique about the "slippery slope" thesis, Hayek stresses that he is not suggesting a strict laissez-faire government and the historical inevitability of totalitarianism but illuminating the logic link between the depriving of economic freedom and the rise of coercive, oppressive rule. In this sense, Hayek's in-depth analysis supplements an important political-economic dimension to Tocqueville's account of modern despotism in the democratic age.

As we have witnessed, the centralized economic control in the communist age through the danwei system had not only caused the condition of scarcity (including the Great

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<sup>73</sup> F. Hayek *et al.*, *The Road to Servitude: Texts and Documents - The Definitive Edition*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 132-133.

<sup>74</sup> *Ivi*, p. 86.

Famine from 1959 to 1961) but also made the basis of the regime's total domination and oppression of the society. In contrast, the revival of the private sector of economy has been the foundation of all corresponding social and legal changes in China's reform era after 1978. It was the daring explorations and experiments by innumerable private enterprises that had brought Chinese society away from the dull and scarce age to one of economic prosperity. The successful practice of reintroducing the market economy had also aroused the particular interest in Hayek's thought and other classical liberal theories among the Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s<sup>75</sup>. The economic reform also had significant political effects. In order to reap the fruit of market economy, the Chinese government, however unwilling, had to introduce the political and legal changes indispensable for the market competition: central planning was abolished, property rights were enacted in laws, the corresponding liberties of movements and communication necessary for business were granted, and a judicial framework based on the rule of law was established to maintain the economic order<sup>76</sup>. In a word, the dominating power of the state was reduced, the arbitrary rule of the administration was limited, and the sphere of the civil society was expanded. The successful part of China's economic reform attested to the importance of the Hayekian and Tocquevillian ideals of individual initiatives, decentralized decisions, and spontaneous collaboration for preserving a vibrant and free social order.

However, as we have mentioned in the previous sections, there are still fundamental limitations on the expanding liberties of the Chinese society in the reform era. The CCP government still concentrates the power and resources in its hands through the existing danwei system and the monopoly of the state-owned-enterprises in key industries. More importantly, the political liberty of participation in the government has never been enjoyed by the Chinese citizens, despite the several experiments in local democracy which in the end have all been abandoned. Under the condition of the asymmetrical state-society power structure, the Chinese government is effective in utilizing resources to suppress political activism and limiting the sphere of the civil society. This situation confirms the analysis of equality and centralization in Tocqueville's account of democratic despotism. But at the same time, as scholars have pointed out, economic modernization (under the names of market economy or capitalism) provides the basic material condition for democracy, primarily a rising middle class with higher economic affluency and education level which ground their autonomy and independence, making a «countervailing societal power» to the state<sup>77</sup>. The economic development in recent decades indeed brought structural changes to the Chinese society, making scholars regard it as closest to an

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<sup>75</sup> Liu, *Classical* cit., p. 49.

<sup>76</sup> Fewsmith, *China* cit., pp. 48-81.

<sup>77</sup> Levitsky *et al.*, *Democracy's* cit., p. 13.

“equality of condition” ever seen and anticipate the further political changes. (see Chong and Ci) The market as a sphere of economic liberty also disperses knowledge and information across the society and helps cultivate citizens’ habit and “virtues” of associating and collaborating with other<sup>78</sup>. The Chinese citizens have started to accumulate the experience of exercising their liberty of associating with each other in the post-totalitarian age, most successfully in economic life, less so in civil society, and very much frustrated in the political life – e.g., the suppressed 1989 Democratic Movement. To achieve liberty is a difficult and ongoing cause, but the hope of fruitful wonders is planted in the constant efforts of trying, as Tocqueville presciently recognized: «There is nothing more fruitful in wonders than the art of being free; but there is nothing harder than apprenticeship in liberty.» (DA, 393) The post-Mao economic reform has brought unprecedented structural transformation to the Chinese society, therefore granting the Chinese people with an open opportunity of choosing liberty or servitude under the new “equality of conditions.”

## Conclusion

People have heatedly discussed the relevance of Tocqueville’s perspectives to contemporary Chinese society. This paper introduces on the reception of Tocqueville in China and engages the ongoing scholarly debates. It points out an understudied aspect of the current literature by stressing that to understand the situation and prospect of democracy in China has a lot to do with the problem of democratic despotism in Tocqueville’s account. The idea is that freedom cannot be taken for granted under the condition of social equality. In fact, liberty and equality are oftentimes in tension with each other. Tocqueville’s comprehensive analysis of modern democracy has shed much light on this tension. His offers a subtle account of the centralization of the state power and the decline of the spirit of liberty under the modern condition of equality. The history and reality of the Chinese society provide a rich case for perusing the danger of this new form of tyranny in the modern age. When Tocqueville’s vision does not cover the new developments like totalitarianism, the ghost of which contemporary China has not totally shredded, Arendt and Hayek’s insights which build on Tocqueville’s can provide the more updated categories for us to grasp and assess the current authoritarian regime in China.

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<sup>78</sup> Behr-Storr, *Tocquevillean* cit., p. 294.