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Democracy in China: Does Taiwan Set an Example

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Democracy in China: Does Taiwan Set an Example?

Similarities and differences in regime development between Taiwan and People's Republic of China

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Introduction

For a long time after the splitting in 1949, both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were undemocratic regimes. Both were ideologically based on the mixing of the ideas of Leninism and nationalism. In current times, China is still a non-democratic regime, whereas Taiwan is considered a (flawed) democracy. Unfortunately, simple comparisons between China and Taiwan could be easily challenged by some factors, inter alia by the size of both countries and number of inhabitants. As John Fairbank (1998) has written: "Comparisons of Taiwan and the mainland are vitiated by the factor of size. The burden of governing 1200 million people scattered over a subcontinent is greater than that of governing 25 million people on a not-very-big island." On the other hand, there are also factors more favorable for the comparison, i.e. shared history and very similar cultural prerequisites or similar mentality of the Chinese and Taiwanese people. Another factor, that was used two decades ago by John Fairbank as an obstacle for the comparison – the absence of huge foreign investments in PRC in comparison with Taiwan – has been eliminated. For these reasons I assume, that the comparison between PRC and Taiwan is now possible and beneficial. Moreover, comparability does not mean similarity, as Bruce Gilley pointed out (Gilley 2008: 5).

The goal of this paper is to compare both countries within three general sets of indicators: economic development (especially in GDP per capita), support for the democratic values among the population and level of the political participation. This comparison will be made not only between China and Taiwan overall, but where the data will be available, I will include examples from Chinese provinces, for the sake of avoiding the problematic "factor of size". In other words, I will strive to answer whether we can find similar indicators, which have a key impact on democratization (such as economic development), or patterns in the perception of democracy and political participation, and if yes, how far they could be considered as an example for China's political transition.

In the first part of the text, I will focus on the brief introduction of some important theoretical issues. In the main part of the text, the quantitative evidence will be presented and compared for highlighting similarities and differences between the two countries in the areas closely connected with democratization process. I will substitute a classic conclusion for some summarizing thoughts about the possible future development of Chinese political regime.



Theoretical and methodological framework: regimes, preconditions and modernization

As mentioned above, both Taiwan and PRC were ruled by undemocratic regimes for a long time and both have undergone significant qualitative changes. Nowadays, Taiwan is, according to the Democracy Index, a “flawed democracy” (EIU 2011: 3-8). The former non-democratic one-party system, ruled by the Kuomintang (KMT) was changed through the “engineered transition” to the two-party democratic system. As Yun-han Chu (2012: 51) pointed out, “Taiwan was perhaps the only case among the third wave democracies in which a quasi-Leninist party not only survived an authoritarian breakdown but turned the crisis to its advantage“. This quote is quite important, because it shows that the transition from a one-party ruled system is not necessary the “end station” for the ruling party. In the case of the current PRC’s regime, its classification is much more difficult. The regime was clearly transformed from the pure totalitarian to the authoritarian regime during the era of “opening”, introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies. However, the regime was later challenged by significant changes in society, mainly caused by the quick economic growth. Because of this, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was forced to adopt necessary measures. But not just the internal affairs have shaped the specificity of Chinese regime. The collapse of the Soviet Union as well as communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe pose a big experience and memento for the CCP leaders. These are the reasons why it is so difficult to precisely define the contemporary regime in China – it has been adapted several times. Therefore, different authors are trying to capture the real essence of regime with modified theories of authoritarianism.

The concept of “fragmented authoritarianism” was introduced by Kenneth G. Lieberthal already in 1988. Another specific approach, closely connected with democratization is the theory of “resilient authoritarianism” promoted by American scholar Andrew J. Nathan. Nathan argues that China was “an autocratic system responsive enough to societal demands to keep itself in power for a long time” (Heberer 2010). There are also other theories, like the “popular authoritarianism” (Brady 2009) or “deliberative authoritarianism” (Baogang a Thøgersen 2010).

Within this theoretical chapter, it is really important to also say a few words about some key values as well as the Chinese perception of the term of “democracy”. First of all, the cultural preconditions are frequently considered as a key feature in Chinese democratization and they are always commemorated, when it comes to the question of the Taiwanese example. Especially Confucianism was often considered as an obstacle for the spread of democracy, although some authors argue that modernization processes will cause serious shifts in the



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Confucian values (Chang – Chu 2002: 28). Taiwan is always mentioned as a primary example of the Chinese nation that is apparently and strongly influenced by the Confucian values, but still was able to develop a democratic regime. Due to the constant economic growth combined with Asian nationalism, the non-democratic regime in China is able to challenge the Western values and question the validity of Western notion of democracy and human rights in the Asian area. Chinese perception of democracy² differs significantly from the Western liberal-democratic tradition. For example Shaun Breslin argues, that in China, “democratization is an essential component of the national project and preventing liberalism – even worse, foreign liberalism – from harming the Chinese people and undermining Chinese power” (Breslin 2010: 146).

Last but not least, it is substantive to elaborate on the validity of the modernization theory. Despite the fact that its thesis, that modernization favors democratization has been challenged repeatedly, nowadays this is fact beyond serious doubt (Welzel 2009: 81). It is also without doubt, that modernization theory is used very frequently in the Chinese conditions, primarily due to the rapid growth of PRC’s economy. Economy itself has a big influence on the perception of the regime by the people in PRC, because they tend to judge the quality of the regime according to their own economic situation and wealth (jdsurvey.com 2009).

As for the methodology, one short note about the relevance of data used below is necessary. For some comparisons, data from the Asian Barometer Survey are used as the evidence in the next chapter. Since some scholars are questioning reliability of this survey on the mainland China, I have to justify my intention to use its outputs. First of all, no more relevant data exists. To avoid misunderstandings in the interpretation of the most important concepts, such as democracy, different kinds of questions are used. After all, the explanatory power of this survey for single country is not so weak, as some scholars suggest. For example, when we look on the results of Asian Barometer Survey questions regarding to the legitimacy of the regime, the support of the Chinese regime will be for most Westerners surprisingly high. On the other hand, if we compare these findings with some Western researches about Chinese regime legitimacy (Gilley 2006), the results will be strikingly similar. Why is that? The key lies in the contextualization. The results of both approaches are most likely valid only for the highest levels of the Chinese regime – e.g. central government, but not for regime as a whole. The lower we go in the regime structure, the lower the legitimacy of particular governmental level. From this example we need to understand, that the results of the Asian Barometer Survey must be interpreted in the context of the each given situation.

² The Chinese notion of the term “democracy” could be defined as “a broader influence of population on the politics and internal affairs” (Womack 1984: 417).



The Evidence

To ensure sufficiently meaningful evidence, the comparison will be conducted in three separate parts. The first will focus on the economic indicators, the second on the public view of different issues connected with the type of regime or political participation, and the third will bring results of some indexes, connected with measuring democracy and some of its sectional indicators.

1. Economic indicators

In the modernization theory, the GDP per capita is always the most important variable, according to the predictions are made. Figure 1 indicates, that the income level in Taiwan and the mainland, with imposing 26 year long lag, shows very similar development in both countries. On the contrary, if we look on the Figure 2, which shows GDP per capita during the 1970 – 2011 period, it is obvious, that the difference between Taiwan and PRC is still huge, despite the fact that the Chinese numbers have been rising steadily in the last decade.

Figure 1: Income Levels in Taiwan (1951–1986) and China (1977–2004) (Source: Gilley 2008: 6)

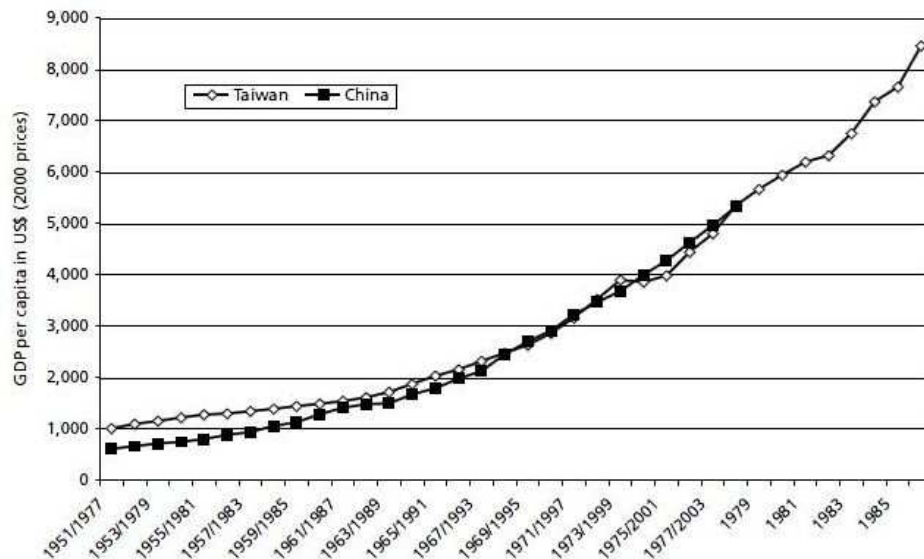
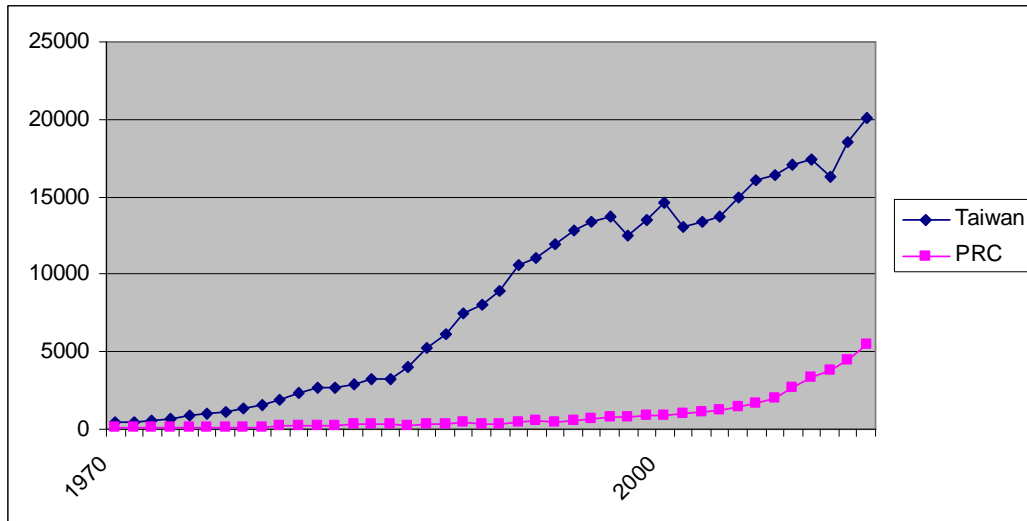




Figure 2: GDP per capita, current prices in US\$, 1970 – 2011 (Source: econstats.com 2013a,b), Data are similar to the World Bank data.



Even if we take into consideration these predictions that reach into the year 2017, as shows the Figure 3, we must admit that these numbers are proving a big gap between Taiwan and PRC. When we look back into history, in the year of Taiwanese transition, the GDP per capita had a value of 13,376 in the current US Dollars. For the comparison, predicted value of mainland's GDP per capita in 2017 is 9,152 US Dollars, therefore significantly below the "necessary" value, which will be probably not reached until around 2025. This fact leads some scholars to predict that China will be a democratic country sometime around the mentioned year³. On the other hand, it should be noted that China's GDP per capita is low, because of its large population. If we take into account the three richest municipalities in China – Tianjin, Beijing and Shanghai, the GDP per capita numbers are suddenly quite different. Tianjin (13 058) has almost surpassed the Taiwanese 1996 score, and the two other cities are also very close. Other rich provinces are right now around the value that is predicted for the whole China for the year 2017.

A brief look on the Human development index (Table 1) also shows, that the mainland is quite behind Taiwan. Once more, the huge population as well as the unequal distribution of wealth are responsible for this large gap. For example Beijing is again nearly on the same level as Taiwan.

³ For example Henry Rowen has predicted in 2007, that China will be „partly free“ country in 2025 (Rowen 2007).



Figure 3: GDP per capita forecast, current prices in US\$, 2007 – 2017 (Source: econstats.com 2013a,b), Data are similar to the World Bank data.

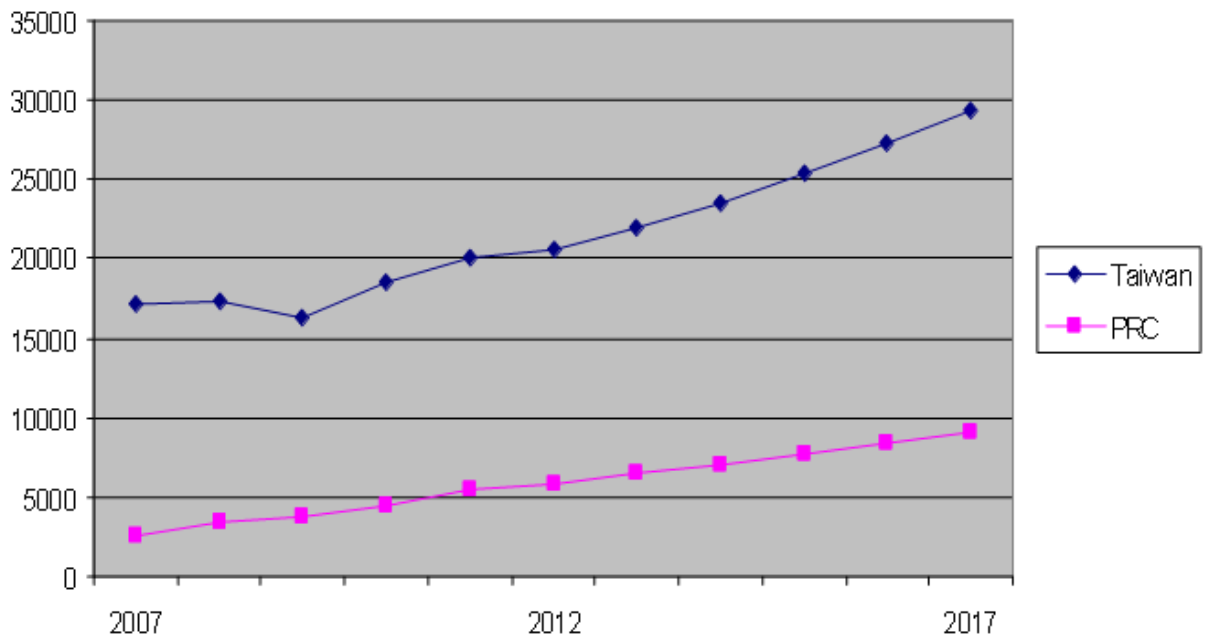


Table 1: HDI Index⁴

	Taiwan	PRC	Beijing
HDI 2010	0,868	0,682	N/A
HDI 2011	0,882	0,687	0,834

2. Support for democratic values

The following observations are based mainly on the Asian Barometer data, collected between years 2005 and 2008. From a simple assumption that Taiwan already has a democratic regime and moreover is economically more developed, we could assume that support for democracy will be higher than in PRC.⁵ Let's start with the question "Which would you think democracy is suitable for your country?" Results in Figure 4 show, that almost every respondent in mainland thinks that democracy is quite or perfectly suitable for

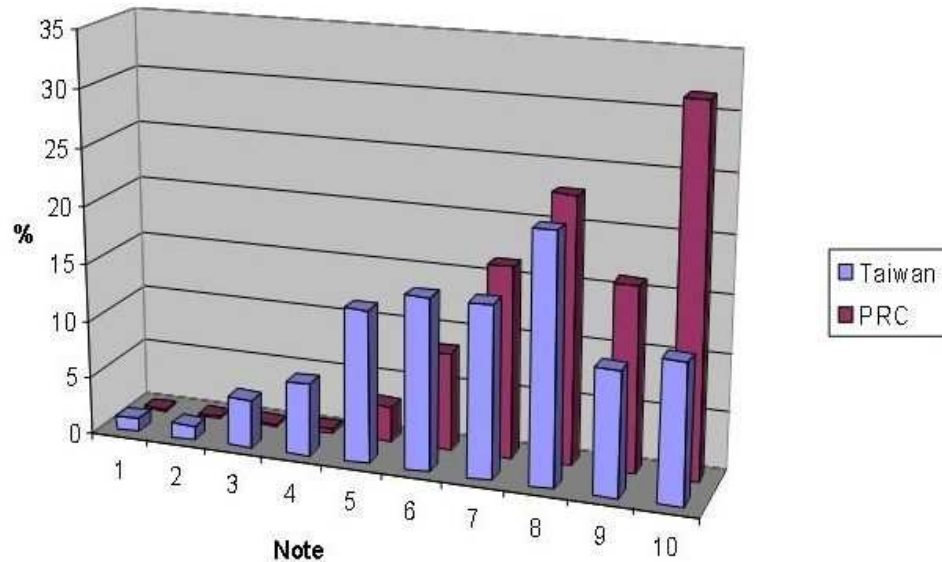
⁴ UN does not count HDI for Taiwan and on the contrary its numbers are included to the PRC results. Numbers of Taiwan are counted by the Taiwanese government itself.

⁵ This correlation is not universally valid, and could be reversed as some disruptive factors as economic saturation or inability of democratic regime to solve important problems can come in effect.



his country. On the contrary, in Taiwan there is a surprisingly significant group of people, which does not consider democracy as a suitable political system for their country.

Figure 4: Which would you think democracy is suitable for your country? (1 = completely unsuitable, 10 = perfectly suitable) Source: Asian Barometer



To avoid potential misunderstandings in different perception of democracy, another question is focused on the contradistinction between democratic and authoritarian regime (see table 2). Once again, Chinese respondents have showed bigger support for democracy, when 80 percent of them said, that democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government, while 22 percent of Taiwanese respondents were open to the authoritarian form of regime.

Table 2: Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion?

	Taiwan	PRC
For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a nondemocratic regime	26,90%	12,00%
Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one	22,00%	8,00%
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government	50,90%	80,00%



If we look on the changes through the time, it is clear, that the support of democracy in PRC was approximately on the same level in 2002 and 2008, whereas support for democracy in Taiwan slightly strengthened (jdsurvey.net 2009). Even older surveys are confirming this development. As Andrew Nathan noted, “traditional values weakened and democratic values strengthened from the first set of surveys in 1993 to the second set of surveys in 2002. And across social categories, urban, younger, and better-educated people (those more exposed to the forces of modernization) are less traditional-minded and, in general, more democratically-inclined than those in the countryside and those who are older or have less education” (Nathan 2008: 180).

Another two questions, which results are shown in tables 3 and 4 are focused on the level and satisfaction with democracy in both countries. According to these results, 78,5 percent of respondents on the mainland think that PRC is a full democracy or democracy with only minor problems. Taiwanese citizens are much more critical. The same situation is in the case of satisfaction, where nearly 90 percent of mainland respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in PRC. From the Western point of view quite unbelievable result. These numbers have to be approached with strong critical view, but despite this warning, it’s clear, that perception of democracy in both countries is strongly positive.⁶

Table 3: In your opinion how much of a democracy is Taiwan/PRC?

	Taiwan	PRC
A full democracy	5,90%	26,70%
A democracy, but with minor problems	47,00%	51,80%
A democracy, with major problems	39,50%	19,80%
Not a democracy	7,50%	1,50%

Table 4: On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Taiwan/PRC?

	Taiwan	PRC
Not at all satisfied	5,60%	1,20%
Not very satisfied	35,50%	10,10%
Fairly satisfied	54,60%	71,60%
Very satisfied	4,20%	17,00%

⁶ Once more I have to point out, that democracy in Chinese perception does not equal multiparty western-style liberal democracy, especially because of different ideological base.



Overall, results about the support of democratic values are quite puzzling and have to be interpreted by additional explanation.

Thin distinctions between understanding of key terms can be surely responsible for some of the variations, but different experiences of both countries are more important. Experience with some common democratic deficits in Taiwan may lead to the lower support of democracy and on the other hand, not enough experience with real (liberal) democracy may lead many Chinese respondents to the assumption that their regime is quite good democracy (of course in the Chinese perception of this term). This could be also connected with indoctrination by the Chinese state propaganda about doctrines like Chinese “democratic socialism” (Lee 2013). After all, “democracy” is surely a common word in the CCP’s rhetoric and as long as the regime is doing well in socio-economic sphere, people has no reason to question party’s claims about democratic China.

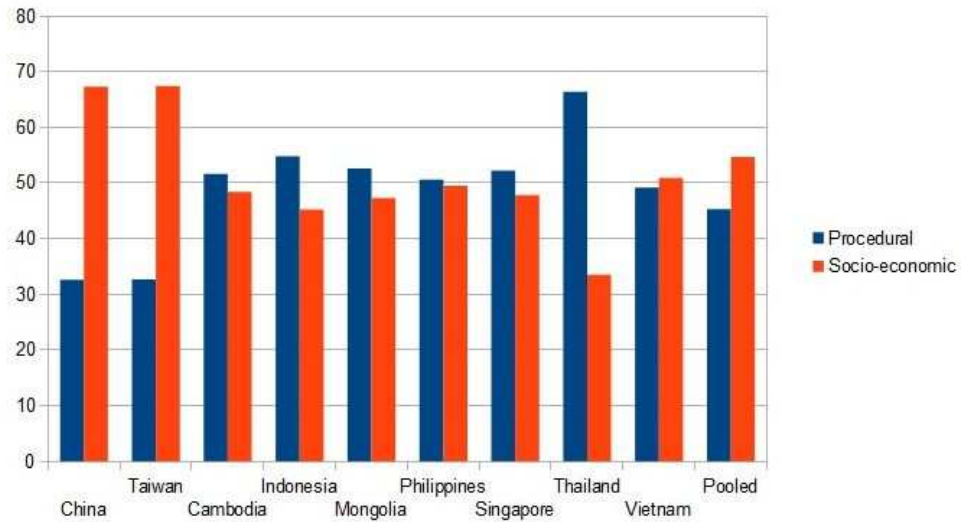
From this point of view, actual answers on question about characteristics essential to democracy could be more important. We can use question nr. 92 which is: “*If you have to choose only one of the things that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential to a democracy?*” Possible valid answers were:

- Opportunity to change the government through elections
- Freedom to criticize those in power
- A small income gap between rich and poor
- Basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter etc. for everyone

First two answers are representing procedural characteristics, last two are closely connected with socio-economic preconditions and overall to the subsistence. While people in majority of East Asian states understand the procedural characteristics as slightly more important, both PRC and Taiwan have strikingly different results which are on the other hand almost identical between each other. From this observation we can assume that incorporation of traditional Chinese expectations of economic prosperity is necessary for the definition of democracy, and on this count, PRC and Taiwan are very similar.

Figure 5: Procedural versus socio-economic characteristics essential to democracy.

Source: Author according to East Asian Barometer, second survey data (valid percent values).



3. Political participation

Political participation and elections in particular, were inevitably important in Taiwanese transition to democracy. Despite the fact that Chinese elections are accompanied by number of questions and disputes about their impact on potential Chinese democratization, it is necessary to compare at least the basic attitudes to them in both countries. From the numbers in table 5 it's clear, that the voter turnout was slightly higher in Taiwan, probably thanks to the general voting right and freedom of the elections. But in the sense of modernization theory, the participation should be also influenced by the economic development and connected trust in democratic values. Paradoxically, empirical study by Yang Zhong and Jie Chen has shown, that people in China, who are more likely to participate in these elections tended to have lower levels of internal efficacy and democratic orientation, follow state and local public affairs, be relatively satisfied with their lives, be older, and have lower education levels. According to this study, in the Jiangsu 2000 elections, there was only 48 % voter turnout (Zhong, Chen 2002: 708). Another quite surprising fact is, that in Taiwan there is almost three times more people than in China, who believes that their elections are not free and fair (table 6).

Table 5: Have you voted in the last election?

	Taiwan	PRC
Yes	86,70%	74,70%
No	13,30%	25,30%



Table 6: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election?*

	Taiwan	PRC
Completely fair and free	18,00%	24,40%
Free and fair, but with minor problems	35,00%	48,80%
Free and fair, with major problems	17,80%	15,70%
Not free or fair	29,10%	10,90%

Because some authors (He 2006) are suggesting, that the voter turnout itself has not enough satisfactory explanation strength about the political participation, we can look briefly on other factors, denominated in tables 7 and 8. Number of attendees of campaigns or rallies testifies about the difference between the two countries in the sense of political freedom as well as the difference between Chinese and Taiwanese citizens in the case of following news about politics. Living in country with limited plurality, Chinese citizens are more interested in news about politics and government.

Table 7: *Attend a campaign meeting or rally*

	Taiwan	PRC
Yes	86,50%	50,00%
No	13,50%	50,00%

Table 8: *How often do you follow news about politics and government?*

	Taiwan	PRC
Practically never	19,60%	0,00%
Not even once a week	8,00%	19,60%
Once or twice a week	18,00%	16,40%
Several times a week	13,70%	16,40%
Everyday	40,60%	47,50%

As the previous chapter shown, connection between economic development and democracy is fairly important. So it is interesting to compare the preferences in the dichotomy between



democracy and economic development. As table 9 shows, in both countries economic wealth clearly outweighs democracy as a value. For example in PRC, this fact is definitely based inter alia also on the official government guiding ideology, founded by Deng Xiaoping, which puts financial wealth of each family and citizen on the first place (after the party interests of course). Last but not least, the traditional Chinese cultural values are playing a big role in this case.

Table 9: If you had to choose between democracy and economic development, which would you say is more important?

	Taiwan	PRC
Economic development is definitely more important	33,20%	35,30%
Economic development is somewhat more important	42,00%	27,80%
Democracy is somewhat more important	12,90%	10,20%
Democracy is definitely more important	2,70%	5,50%
They are both equally important	9,00%	20,90%

4. The “real” development

Summing up, there are differences as well as similarities between Taiwan and mainland China. Mainly the development of Chinese economy connected with modernization indicates, that PRC could feel some changes connected with liberalization and shifts towards more democratic (or better to say freer) political regime (some of these, mainly economic, changes are already materializing in the forthcoming reforms, introduced in November 2013). On the other hand, we should have in mind persisting obstacles for potential similar development of Taiwanese and Chinese liberalization.

One of the most important preconditions in democratization process is strengthening the rule of law. In his study (2007), Weitseng Chen found, that both China and Taiwan exhibit „strikingly similar patterns and progression during the development of rule-of-law-without-democracy model“, which was actual during the Taiwanese transition. On the other hand, the same study revealed, that Taiwan was in its democratization strongly influenced by four important factors, which, however, do not exist in China. These factors are: early legislation, election as an alternative mechanism for law enforcement, international pressure and different role of nationalism (Chen 2007: 84 – 86).

Similarly, if we look on the indexes measuring “quality” of political regimes or some key freedoms, it is obvious that People’s republic of China was making no progress during few



last decades, at least not according to the western measures. The figure 6 shows the ratings of Taiwan and PRC during the 1949-2011 period in the PolityIV Project. Very similar results are coming from Democracy index or Bertelsmann Transformation Index, which both attribute PRC as a country with low and stagnating level of democracy. On the contrary, Taiwan is considered as a flawed democracy (rated 37th out of 167 measured countries) (EIU 2011: 15). As a brief representative of the most important freedoms, the evaluation of freedom of press is depicted in figure 7.

Figure 6: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, Taiwan and PRC, 1949 – 2011 Source: PolityIV Project 2012

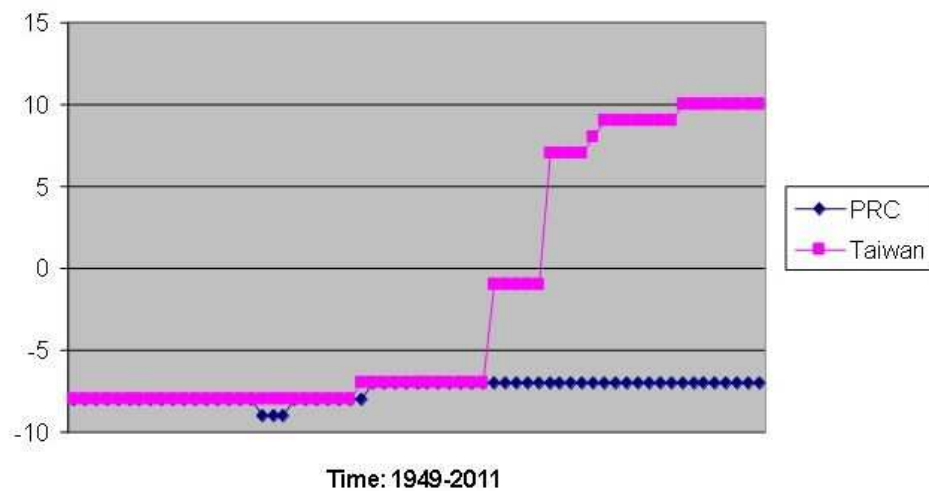
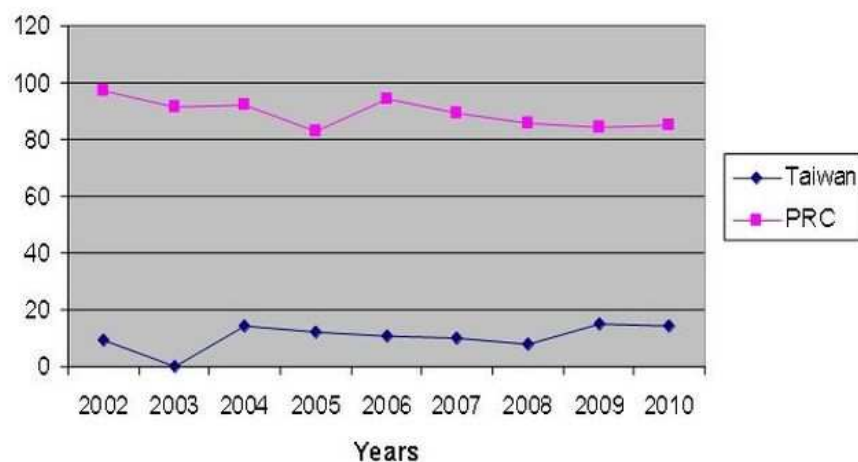


Figure 7: Freedom of press in PRC and Taiwan 2002 – 2010. Source: Reporters Without Borders 2013.





Instead of conclusion

In this last chapter I will bring up some final summarizing thoughts, as some unclear issues are still in place. Taiwan is definitely playing a big role in the mainland's political reformation and development of its politics, but it is very uncertain, if the Taiwanese path to democracy could be used as an example for the PRC. Previous chapters have outlined some crucial factors that are similar for both countries. For instance, the Chinese economic development is probably on the right way and connection between economic performance and perception of democracy is clearly visible in both countries⁷. Modernization in PRC has seemingly positive impacts on education and urbanization and as Andrew Nathan argued, “[...] *this suggests that, as time goes by, the Chinese regime will find its authoritarian style of rule out of synch with the values of a better-educated and more urban public-*” (Nathan 2008). However, due to different conditions, it appears that China will not go exactly the same way as Taiwan went, as key indicators remain stable (while support of democratic values grows, the quality of "democracy" or freedom of the media remains at the same level in the long term). This could be rather negative observation, as the support of democratic values possibly equals support for CCP's regime. It is therefore likely that, if the bigger transition occurs, it will be rather striking and not gradual as in the case of Taiwan.

To be more specific, I want to quote two divergent thoughts about the mainland's future, which however both recognize the differences between Taiwanese democratization and possible future of the mainland China. Larry Diamond stresses how the structural differences between the two states will likely bring about dramatically different denouements for authoritarian rule. China's large size, its different institutions, and its worsening inequalities and corruption, he believes, will make it harder for the CCP to engineer the sort of soft landing to democracy achieved in Taiwan. (Diamond via Gilley 2008: 14).

On the other hand Gilley concludes that “the transition of PRC could be quite similar to the transition of Taiwan. While the Taiwanese transition was categorized as “conversion” (the state undertakes a deliberate, planned move to democracy under only moderate pressure

⁷ It should be noted, that Taiwan could have also a direct impact on Chinese politics. In 2012, the presidential elections were held on Taiwan and the election campaign was one of the most exciting events for citizens on the mainland. In the presidential elections four years ago, it was estimated that about 200 million mainland Chinese viewers watched the ballot counting via internet or satellite television (Yun-han Chu 2012: 43). This fact has to be considered as a proof, that many Chinese citizens are impressed and interested in democratic elections and democratic political regime as a whole. But it's not only the matter of television or the internet. Since the traveling between PRC and Taiwan is possible, many Chinese tourists, businessman or students are directly confronted with reality of Taiwan's democratic regime. This experience is for many of them a turning point in their political thinking. Journalists often bring news about Chinese people, who are led to believe, that Taiwan's democracy is chaotic and its elections are prone to violence, but the personal visit often changes everything (Jacobs 2012).



from social forces”, the Chinese transition would likely belong to a neighboring type, “extrication”, which is a type of state-led democratization that is carried out in “*a more hurried or crisis-ridden way because of greater social pressure.*” (Gilley via Nathan 2008: 178).

It should be also once more time noted, that the role of economic development is crucially important in this issue, but it is not quite clear, how far will the economic growth be really a supportive factor for the Chinese democratization. Paradoxically, it seems that if a significant change in the type of Chinese political regime ever happened, the economic growth would have to slow down significantly, because Chinese citizens tend to judge the quality of regime according to the economic situation of their households (Huang 2011: 17). With regards to the economic preconditions it should be also reminded, that according to some scholars, the People’s Republic of China is simply not yet at the point of development, at which the democratization should occur (Gilley 2008: 20).

The major fact that economy and well-being are very closely connected to the political development can be confirmed by few other observations. In simple terms, survival of CCP and its legitimacy is closely connected to the economic performance. A new set of (mainly economic) reforms⁸, which was unveiled in November 2013, can be considered as a proof that Chinese leaders do know that only moving forward in terms of quality of people’s living can assure a continuing future leadership for the Party. Along with that, however, comes liberalization of whole society.

If I should answer the question about possibility of finding similar indicators with key impact on democratization laid down in the introduction, then I must say both yes and no. Although there are some positive factors, like similar connections between economy and politics in both societies, PRC is still so much delayed in development, mainly due to the large area and huge number of inhabitants. Therefore we can retrospectively admit the problematic “factor of size”, but not in the initial sense of in-comparability, however within the meaning of excessive slowing of Chinese development.

In the end, only one thing is clear. If the transition to democracy in PRC occurs, it will not be the western-style liberal democratization, but democratization in more specific incremental form, which will differ in number of parameters from the Western liberal traditions. Moreover, this result will be similar with the result of Taiwanese democratization.

⁸ Reforms, which are by the way referred as “unprecedented” and “the most significant since Deng Xiaoping led a series of reforms in the late 1970s and the early 1980s” (Yao – Blanchard 2013).



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⁹ All websites checked on December 9, 2013.



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