

How Can China Get Out of Cycle of Dynasties?

A Tocquevillian Perspective

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Introduction

Tocqueville had never been to China, but he did offer a few interesting observations on the country. In a footnote of Vol. I of his masterpiece *Democracy in America*, he commented,

“China appears to me to offer the most perfect emblem of the kind of social well-being that a very centralized administration can furnish to peoples who submit to it. Travelers tell us that the Chinese have tranquility without happiness, industry without progress, stability without force, and material order without public morality. Among them society always runs well enough, never very well. I imagine that when China is open to the Europeans, the latter will find the most beautiful model of administrative centralization that exists in the universe.”
(Tocqueville 2000, 86)

The context of this statement was that Tocqueville distinguished governmental centralization from administrative centralization and further, contrasted administrative centralization with decentralization in terms of their political effects. He mainly focused on the advantages of administrative decentralization in America, and contrasted them to the disadvantages of administrative centralization in France and other European countries. Always keeping his own country in mind, he found the best example of administrative centralization in China in the world.

Was Tocqueville’s account accurate? Should China be characterized as a perfect instance of administrative centralization? Did Tocqueville’s statement on imperial China apply to modern and contemporary China? What are the political effects of administrative centralization in the country? How can China overcome the problem? This study is a preliminary effort to answer these questions.

The Origin of the Unitary and Centralized System in Imperial China

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Although in ancient China, political systems, like the medieval Europe, seemed feudal and decentralized (Ch'ü 2005), the country became highly centralized with the establishment of the imperial regime in 221 BC. The Qin dynasty united the country by force and formed a unitary system of political control, and thus the feudal system was replaced by the prefecture-county system. Then, the prefecture-county system was implemented in most of the imperial era, although there were some brief interrupts in its long history.

The key to the prefecture-county system lied in the fact that the country was divided into a number of prefectures and counties, and the governors and magistrates were directly appointed by the emperors. The powers of the prefectures and counties derived from the center, and the governors and magistrates were responsible to the emperors. Moreover, all the prefectures and counties implemented and enforced the same or similar laws and policies that were made by the center. The central government and emperors were supreme, and the local governments and magistrates were nothing more than the machines of implementing the central commands and imperial directives. Thus, it was widely believed that the imperial government was unitary and centralized, and the general tendency was that the more recent dynasties, the more centralized (Ch'ien 2005, 154; Hsiao 2006, 65-79).

In Chinese history, the imperial authority considered unity and unification of the country as a sacred aim. Thus, emperors and the imperial court always made every effort to maintain the unity of the state, laws and institutions, culture, and thinking. As what Hobbes ([1651] 1952) argued in his *Leviathan*, the imperial authority believed that the unity of the country required the unitary system of government and centralization of power. There could be only one sovereign in the country, and it was the emperor.¹ All local officials, whether high or low in the hierarchical structure, were appointed by the emperor and the central government. Although provincial leaders could provide suggestions for promotion, demotion, or removal of lower officials, formal decisions were made by the center (Ch'ü 2003, 14).

At the same time, in terms of appointing officials, there was a rule of avoidance that required officials not to hold office in their home provinces. This rule means that officials were working in the provinces with which they were not familiar. Without knowing local conditions, the officials were unlikely to govern their jurisdictions according to the need of local people. In fact, the rule had forced the officials to identify their own interests with the imperial authority, which in fact made local self-government extremely difficult, if not impossible (Zhou 2006, 350).

¹ In Chinese classics, there were full of expressions regarding unity and the unitary system. One popular one was that, "There should be no two suns in the universe, no two kings in one country, no two patriarchs in one family; there could be only one governor. This is the meaning of unity." (Zhou 2006, 338)

Further, consistent with the centralized and unitary system, the fiscal and judicial matters were also controlled by the central government. Budgeting and expending of local governments, including salaries and operational costs, were decided by the center, and local tax collectors were nothing more than the agents of the central tax officials. Also, although local officials had certain judicial powers in their jurisdictions, judgments of all criminal cases involving penal servitude must be approved by the central Board of Punishment. All lawsuits involving death penalty must be adjudicated by the central officials, and the final decision was in the hand of the emperors. In fact, the emperors were the supreme judge in the empire (Ch'ü 2003, 14-15).

Under the centralized regime, local society had relatively limited autonomy. In contrast with rural areas, urban society was more subject to control of imperial authority. Unlike the cities and towns in European history that enjoyed remarkable political autonomy with constitutional guarantees (Berman 1983, 357-403), the cities in Chinese history had no independent and self-governing status. Weber (1964, 13-15) contrasted the cities in the Occident with those in China, and found that the former had charter-guaranteed liberties, while the later “nothing of the kind could be found.” Rather, the cities in China were imperial fortresses and had fewer formal guarantees of self-government than the village. The cities could not legally make contracts, file law suits, and function as a corporate body.

Meanwhile, Weber (1964, 13-14) pointed out that, “The oriental city was not a ‘polis’ in the sense of Antiquity, and it knew nothing of the ‘city law’ of the Middle Ages, for it was not a ‘commune’ with political privileges of its own. Nor was there a citizenry in the sense of a self-equipped military estate such as existed in occidental Antiquity. No military oath-bound communities like the *Compagna Communis* of Genoa or other *coniurationes* ever sprang up to fight or ally themselves with feudal lords of the city in order to attain autonomy.” It is no wonder that cities and towns in imperial China did not play a role in limiting the power of emperors and striving for a constitutional government.

In contrast with cities and towns, rural society enjoyed certain degree of autonomy in imperial China. First, in traditional China, there was no formal government below the county level, and the emperor was far away. Despite the vast territory and a large population in some counties,² no town and township governments were institutionalized. Second, the county government was relatively small, and usually it was composed of a magistrate and a handful of clerks and runners. Moreover, owing to the rule of avoidance, the magistrate was not from his jurisdiction. Thus, he had to rely on local gentry and elites as informal leaders who were well acquainted with local conditions and usually respected by local people.

² Although the size of counties varied in imperial China, some of them had a jurisdiction over hundreds of villages and hundreds of thousands of people in Qing dynasty. See Ch'ü (2003, 6).

As educated people and degree-holders, the gentry were generally considered as the social equals of the local officials in imperial China. Although the gentry spent much time in obtaining personal privileges and interests, they also concerned themselves with the promotion of the welfare and the protection of local interests. Usually, the gentry acted as intermediaries between the imperial officials and the local people, and advised the officials on local affairs and represented local interests to the officials. In fact, the gentry took an active part in local public affairs, and together with the officials kept the wheels of the society turning (Chang 1955, 32-70).

The gentry, as informal leaders in rural society, “undertook many tasks such as welfare activities, arbitration, public works, and at times the organization of local military corps or the collection of taxes. Their cultural leadership encompassed all the values of Confucian society but was also materially expressed in such actions as the preservation of village temples, schools, and examination halls.” (Chang 1955, 51) The important role of the gentry demonstrated that in contrast to cities, rural society was relatively less subject to official administration.

Then, did the participatory role of the gentry in administering rural affairs imply that villages were self-governing in imperial China? Some scholars had an affirmative answer by arguing that the villages suffered virtually no governmental interference and that village leaders acted under no direct official warrant. Weber (1964, 92-93) found that, unlike the cities, villages in imperial China enjoyed certain degree of self-government. The villages functioned as corporate bodies through their temples that took care of local public goods and services, and the villages were even considered as the armed associations capable of defending their own interests. The government intervened with village affairs only where interests of state were concerned.

Similarly, Rankin (1986, 15) emphasized that, “In any locality there was also a generally recognized area of community interest in which consensual decisions were articulated by community leaders and services were managed by local men. Although most visible in the villages, such spheres existed at higher urban levels as well. Because the state did not routinely intervene, the informal means of local decision-making were highly developed.”

Others, however, thought that the villages were not self-governing, because the gentry was only a small group of the rural population, and the common people had no chance to participate in decision-making over village affairs. Also, the gentry’s governing power was not institutionalized, and their interests were in conflict with other villagers at time (Ch’ü 2003, 337-338). In fact, the rural society “enjoyed autonomy not because the government intended to give it something like self-government, but because the authorities were unable completely to control or supervise its activities. Such ‘autonomy,’ in other words, was a result of incomplete centralization; the government never hesitated to interfere with village life whenever it deemed it necessary or desirable.” (Hsiao 1960, 263)

Furthermore, in late imperial period, the center strengthened the control over the rural society by establishing *baojia*, *lijia*, and *xiangyue* systems. *Baojia* became the system of police control, a device to watch and check the number, movements, and activities of the people, through agents selected from local inhabitants. Every hundred households were arranged into a *jia*, and every ten *jia* formed a *bao*. The *lijia* system was established for tax collection. The heads of *lijia* were assigned the duty of collecting the tax records of the households under their supervision and reporting them to officials (Hsiao 1960, 26-33; Xu 2004, 105-116). *Xiangyue*, originally a system of promoting virtuous behavior, became the tool of ideological control over local society by requiring rural people to learn the imperial orders and edicts in Qing dynasty (Kuhn 1975, 260-261).

Although there was certain degree of village autonomy in imperial China, it is widely believed that the old regime was quite centralized. Lucian Pye (1985, 183), an influential sinologist and political scientist, found that the Chinese believed that, “all power should emanate from above, from the center, from a single supreme ruler.” In imperial China, local authorities were the delegates of the supreme authority and the obedient agents of centralized power, and the power of magistrates came entirely from their role as representatives of the imperial court. Although the magistrates might be aware of local concerns, their authority was based on the identification with the imperial court. Thus, despite the enormous diversity of physical, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions in the country, the imperial authority had never made policies that took into account the diversity. Instead, “political issues have usually emanated from the center; but if pressing concerns are raised in one part of the country, they are either quickly suppressed or are taken over by the central authorities and made into national concerns, relevant for the whole country.” (Pye 1985, 184)

Some scholars even compared imperial China with France under the old regime, and concluded that the Asian empire was more centralized than the European monarch, which is consistent with Tocqueville’s remarks on China. In France, local communes enjoyed some autonomy and self-government, while both cities and villages in China did not have self-governing authorities (Ch’ü 2003, 331).

To be sure, in Chinese history, many scholars noticed the problems with centralization of powers and administration and called for reforms. For instance, Gu Yanwu, a leading scholar in late Ming and early Qing, found that the main disadvantage of the prefecture-county system was centralization of authority and autocracy of the center. Thus, he suggested that the feudal elements should be infused into the prefecture-county system (Hsiao 2005, 406). The late-Qing scholar Feng Guifen also recognized the problem of the centralized system, and advocated the expansion of the political role for the lower bureaucracy and local literati. He proposed to restore the system of local headmen and the ancient rural government system in which district and neighborhood officers formed a fine network of control in the villages. These local officers would be chosen by villagers, and thus win the trust of local people (Kuhn 1995, 327-328).

In late Qing, quite a few reformers believed that the imperial government should allow wider participation in policy making, but the participation was encouraged not for limiting state power and achieving justice, but for enhancing the state power and governmental effectiveness (Kuhn 1995, 313; 317). Reforms of local government in some provinces demonstrated the goal of extending the bureaucratic reach of the central government through establishing a formal balance of power between county magistrates and local elites, with the provincial government functioning as a court of appeal (Thompson 1988, 195). In 1909, the imperial government began to implement local self-government regulations and establish elected county and town councils throughout China (Thompson 1988, 211).

Local Self-government Movement and Re-centralization in Republican China

The 1911 Revolution under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen overthrew the imperial regime, and was aimed at establishing a republic. Immediately, quite a few provinces declared independence. Next year, the emperor was forced to abdicate his position, and the imperial regime was over after more than two thousand years of history. Soon, Yuan Shaikai became the President of the Republic, and continued carrying on centralizing and modernizing policies made under the Qing dynasty within a republican format.

Yuan sought to continue to centralize administrative control and extend bureaucracy downwards into society. His programs were largely aimed at bringing local men into the new county and sub-county agencies under the direction of the magistrate. Yuan and some other leaders, even including Sun Yat-sen, believed that a strong and centralized government would be necessary for modernization and national strengthening. Many measures taken by Yuan Shikai amplified the conflict between centralized state-building and demands for political participation (Rankin 1997). Unsatisfied with Yuan's policies and restoration of the imperial regime, some provincial leaders and local elites made some efforts to promote local self-government.

In fact, in the waning years of the Qing dynasty, the imperial court began to decree constitutional reforms with a primary focus on local level of administration. A constitutional timetable, promulgated with the first constitutional document in 1908, proposed that local self-government bodies in every county, municipality, and township would be established by 1913 and 1914. Although the aim of the imperial court was to bring central control to the local level and to “bolster official rule (*guan zhi*) while granting the local elite only the trappings of self-rule (*zizhi*),” some reformers maintained that self-government should be primarily a system based upon local initiative and autonomy, which would be the foundation of national strength and power (Schoppa 1976, 504-505). In other words, central power-holders, militarists and local civil elites all

appealed to the idea of self-government, but gave it different meanings during the debates and power struggles of the early Republic (Rankin 1997, 269).

Although many politicians and elites were nationalists, some leading figures identified themselves with provincial interests and traditions, and even regarded province as the key to the nation. For the nationalists, the nation was a centralized state that had no space for provincial traditions and autonomy, while for the provincialists, the nation was built upon provinces with certain degree of autonomy. Even before the downfall of the imperial regime, some scholars started to protest central or foreign domination and to advocate the independence and autonomy of provinces.

In 1903, for instance, Ou Qujia published his *New Guangdong* that urged the independence and autonomy of Guangdong province. In this booklet, Ou asserted that, “The people of Guangdong are truly the masters of Guangdong.... When the people of Guangdong manage their own affairs and complete their own independence (*zili*), then it is the beginning of the independence of all China.” (Duara 1995, 181; Cheng 2006, 35-36) In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Mao Tse-tung was an ardent advocate of his hometown Hunan’s independence and autonomy. He maintained that Hunan should be governed by Hunanese, and that unity under the center was the fundamental cause of the misfortune of the people (Duara 1995, 191).

Based on such an understanding, the provincialists launched the federal self-government movement in the 1910s and 1920s, which signified the “marriage of provincial autonomy and the democratic ideology of self-governance.”(Duara 1995, 187) It was believed that the most basic and representative demand of the movement was that, “the national constitution could only be formulated on the foundations of, and subsequent to, the establishment of provincial constitutions, which in turn would be decided by a popularly elected provincial assembly.”(Duara 1995, 179)

Thus, a number of provinces, especially in south China, began to draft their own constitutions and attempted to build constitutional republics. For instance, Hunan province under the leadership of some influential statesmen, drafted the Constitution of Hunan Province in 1921, which went in effect on January 1, 1922. The nature of the Constitution was republic, and it was believed that the Constitution was still, in principle, the most radical that China had seen (Duara 1995, 192). It provided that Hunan was a self-governing province, and the self-governing power belonged to all the people in Hunan. According to the Constitution, citizens enjoyed the rights to and freedoms of life, property, religion, speech, association, and even the right to keep and bear arms. Also, the Constitution enumerated the powers of the province and established the separation of powers among legislative, administrative, and judicial branches, and provided a structure for county, municipality, and township self-government (Xia et al. 2004, 657-670).

At the same time, Guangdong province was becoming a force in the federal self-government movement under the leadership of Chen Jiongming, who was influenced by

anarchism and considered the nation as an abstract category. Although it was said that he never entertained the idea of provincial independence, Chen devoted himself to provincial autonomy and development by promoting education, infrastructure, and public order. Under his guidance, Guangdong drafted its own constitution that was seen as the “most superior and practicable among all of the provincial constitutions.” Unfortunately, Chen soon clashed with Sun Yat-sen who preferred the military Northern Expedition to unify the country, and the self-government experiment in Guangdong was aborted (Duara 1995, 194-197).

Another province known for the self-government movement was Zhejiang. After Yuan Shikai’s death in 1916, some political and military leaders in Zhejiang asserted that “Zhejiang is the Zhejiang of Zhejiangese,” and that provincial self-government was not anti-national but the foundation of the nation. In 1920, the Zhejiang Assembly proposed a constitutional autonomous province, and called for drafting a provincial constitution to protect its self-government. During the next six years, three constitutional drafts were written, and all endorsed basically a federal framework, despite the slight differences among them. Although these drafts were never put into effect partly due to the dispute between nationalists and provincialists, the seriousness of purpose and the extensive discussion of various constitutional issues made the self-government movement in Zhejiang memorable (Schoppa 1977; Shen 2005, 325-384).

When the centralizers under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen launched the Northern Expedition to unify the country militarily in 1924, the federal self-government movement was generally over and the efforts to draft and implement provincial constitutions had to be given up. The provinces were not able to sustain their independent or autonomous stance into the republic principally because of the persistent and powerfully negative, moral characterization of provincial autonomy as “heterodox.” (Duara 1995, 185) It was also believed that most of the leaders never regarded federalism and provincial self-government as an end, but simply a means to fight against the restoration of the monarchy or to prevent civil war. Thus, the federal self-government movement was intended to become the first step to unify and strengthen the country. No wonder soon the military unification won the upper hand and the discourse of federalism faded away (Song 2000, 110). Of course, it is unfair to say that all of the proponents of federalism were half-hearted. In fact, many advocated federalism in good faith and regarded it as the best means to renew China to deal with warlordism (Waldron 1990, 117).

Although the federal self-government movement and provincialism failed in the 1910s and 1920s, it did not mean that the establishment of the modern centralized Chinese nation-state was inevitable (Schoppa 1977, 674). In fact, at that time, some scholars asserted that there was an alternative way of structuring the society that would be much less coercive, bureaucratic, and totalizing than was a centralized state. It was argued that local self-government and the village-district system in the *Rites of Zhou (Zhouli)* in ancient China provided a much attractive approach for the restructuring of the society (Hon 2004, 528-531).

By 1927, the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek defeated several major warlords and unified a large part of the country. The Leninist regime soon centralized the government and strengthened the control over local society. In fact, since the late imperial era, China has witnessed a deliberate and far-ranging trend toward centralization of power in building a modern and strong state (Bedeski 1981; Huang 1985; Duara 1988; Zhang 2000). As Kuhn (2002, 132) put it, the twentieth-century politics of China is “a story about the relentless march of the central state.” If the imperial state had physical difficulties in penetrating villages, the state under the Nationalist Party took advantage of any modern improvements to reach local society. In particular, the rapid development of mass communication and transportation in the early twentieth century made the state much easier to interfere with local affairs. The efforts to build a strong and modern state greatly transformed rural areas, and the state began to penetrate local society more deeply and moved toward bureaucratization, rationalization, and administrative extension (Duara 1988).

The early steps taken by the Nationalist Party were to establish sub-county administration that was based on a four-level hierarchy of units below the county (Kuhn 1975, 284-285). In 1941, it enforced the “large township” (*daxiang*) system, consisting of 1000 households, which was aimed at replacing the administrative functions of villages. The establishment of townships was an important step taken by the central state to penetrate and control local society, and the penetration worsened the problem of “state involution,” which means the state cannot develop systems of bureaucratic responsibility at a rate faster than the entrenchment of the informal apparatus of extraction (Duara 1988, 223-225). No doubt, the Republican government under the Nationalist Party was quite centralized from the 1920s to 1940s, but the communist regime under Mao was even more so.

Totalitarian Rule and Centralization under Mao and Transitional Reforms after Mao

In late 1949, Mao and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled the continent, and claimed to build a “New China” under the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The ideology had a strong belief in a highly centralized and unitary state, and Mao’s China was founded on such a belief (Song 2000, 111). Soon after he came into power, Mao began to take steps to strengthen the central power and to restructure the society in almost every aspect. Not only did he dominate the central government and purged everyone who dared to challenge his power, but also he tightly controlled the appointments of provincial leaders and punished anyone who defied his directives. The experiments of local self-government in Republican era totally disappeared under Mao.

In urban China, Mao established work units (*danwei*) to monitor and control residents. The people had to depend on their work units for all kinds of welfare, from housing, medical care to children education. Every work unit had a party branch, and it was the chairman of the party branch who usually dominated the work unit. Thus, the work units, whether a factory or a school, were politicized and bureaucratized, and the administration of the work units were very similar to the government. The everyday life of the urban residents was subject to the bureaucratic control, and work units in fact became parts of the administrative machine that was totalitarian in nature.

Meanwhile, Mao made every effort to penetrate into rural society and control peasants who helped him defeat Kiang Kai-shek. First, Mao reorganized rural communities by establishing “administrative villages” (*xingzheng cun*) across the boundaries of natural villages, which is still practiced today. The goal of the reorganization was for consolidation, concentration, and penetration, and did not take into account historical and traditional boundaries of natural villages and their common interests.

Second, the Communist party-state went further to penetrate villages by setting up a Party branch in each administrative village or brigade, which is still the case at present. The Party branch became the governing body in villages, with the Party Secretary at the top and having the final say. For the first time in Chinese history, party penetrated villages and was institutionalized. Since the Party Secretary was usually appointed directly or approved by township officials, he/she identified himself or herself with the official interests rather than village interests. Following the order and directives of township government, the Party branch in villages, in fact, became one level of the hierarchical bureaucracy. By establishing the Party branches in villages, the penetration of the Communist state into rural society was unprecedented.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Mao began to collectivize farming and rural life, and launched many movements, including the notorious Great Leap Forward. The agricultural radicalism and collectivization profoundly transformed village organization and decision making over farming (Zweig 1989; Yang 1996; Unger 2002). Hundreds of thousands of communes were organized in rural areas, and villages and peasants were forced to join the communes. Villages were organized as brigades, and each brigade included several production teams. The collective system was designed to gather the produce of peasants more firmly than ever into the hands of the communist state (Kuhn 2002, 110). Such kind of collectivization and centralization led to a tragic famine and paved “the road to serfdom” (Hayek 1944). It was estimated that about 20 or even 30 million of people died of the famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s following the Great Leap Forward (Becker 1996).

It is clear that, during the Mao era, the party-state was extraordinarily successful in terms of penetrating local society. Local cadres had to carefully follow Mao and carry the messages of the center to all localities. These messages “were usually consistent with traditional Chinese politics in that they called for conformity to the behavioral standards

of the central authorities and for obedience to the wishes of the ultimate ruler.” (Pye 1985, 191)

Soon after Mao’s death in 1976, the party-state under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping began to implement the “open and reform” policy. In order to promote local initiatives, the center was committed to certain degree of decentralization. In fact, there was a shift away from the requirement of universal conformity to policies related to efficiency and utility. “In order to carry out the wishes of the center, cadres found it increasingly necessary to take into account the marginal advantages of their local resources. As a result different localities have begun to favor different policy mixes.” (Pye 1985, 191)

In the late 1970s, some peasants pioneered to experiment family farming by allocating their collective land to each household. The success of the experiment led its spread to other rural areas soon. In the next few years, the collectivized farming was dismantled throughout the country, and the “household responsibility system” was established. The dissolution of collective farming significantly undermined the economic control of the communist state over rural society, and individual households took back their decision-making power over farming, although land is still collectively owned (Kelliher 1992; Zhou 1996).

At the same time, village governing structure changed, and some villages organized Villagers’ Committee and elected the members of the committee. When the government recognized that election might be an effective way to mitigate the tensions between peasants and cadres, it sanctioned or partly supported village elections. In 1987, the government passed the Organic Law on Villagers’ Committee (experimental), and the Villagers’ Self-government (*cunmin zizhi*) and village elections became legitimized. Now, tens of thousands of villages hold village elections every few years, and studies found that the elections had some positive influences on village governance and decision-making over public affairs (Manion 1996; Li and O’Brien 1999; O’Brien and Li 2000; O’Brien 2001).

Although the party-state has moved toward devolution in post-Mao era, which brought out the remarkable economic development, the decentralization is quite limited in terms of the scope and depth. First, the decentralization is generally limited to economic field, and the political system is still highly centralized. Although local governments are allowed to make some economic decisions that take into account local conditions, they are not entitled to make important political decisions and carry out political experiments to meet local need. In other words, in political field, the local governments have to follow the center carefully.

Second, even in economic field, the decentralization is not thorough, and the decision-making power of local governments is very limited. For instance, local governments have little decision-making power over fiscal, financial, and property rights policies that are tightly controlled by the center, and are not entitled to supervise the nationally

monopolistic state-owned enterprises, such as railroad, telecommunication, and oil companies.

Finally, the post-Mao decentralization is not institutionalized, and the center can take back any decision-making power from the localities at will. In other words, there is no legal guarantee for the powers that the center devolves to local governments. Usually, the case would be that, when the local governments are more obedient to the directives of the center, they will be permitted to exercise more decision-making powers. Otherwise, the powers of the localities would be disenfranchised.

Therefore, it is widely agreed that the unitary party-state is still highly centralized, and the localities, without autonomous and self-governing status, are subject to the tight control of the center. Now, the socialist regime is confronted with enormous challenges that are closely related to the centralized nature of the government. For example, without further and substantial devolution, economic development is encountering daunting obstacles in many localities. Many local governments recognize that, when economic growth reaches certain stages, political reforms and institutionalized decentralization is indispensable. Thus, the local officials are pushing the center to devolve more powers, including political and legal ones, to the localities in order to promote economic development. In fact, some local governments, especially in the rich regions, are even challenging the center by making local protectionist policies.

At the same time, several minorities, unsatisfied with the unitary and centralized system, are posing an alarming challenge to the party-state. The Uygurs, the Tibetans, and Mongols are constantly requiring more autonomy, and the recent protests and riots in Tibet are an intimidating warning to Chinese leaders. In fact, the CCP has an inconsistent attitude towards minorities and their autonomy before and after it took power in 1949. In its earliest stage, the CCP strongly supported the autonomy, independence, and self-determination of minorities, and even proposed the idea of a federalist republic. For instance, in the declaration issued at its second National Congress in 1922, the CCP explicitly advocated the establishment of a “Federal Republic of China.” This declaration held that “Mongolia, Tibet, and Muslim Xinjiang will become democratic and autonomous states that practice self-determination.” (Song 2000, 110)

Later, the 1931 Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic specified that the Han, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan nationalities were fully entitled to determine their own rules and regulations, including the right of secession. In 1933, the “Ten Political Guiding Principles of the Soviet Republic of China” maintained that the CCP recognized the full right of every nationality to self-determination. At the Seventh Congress Meeting of the CCP in 1945, Mao said, “All minority groups have the right to determine on a voluntary basis whether or not they join the Federation of the Han majority.” (Song 2000, 110-111)

The CCP, however, was not a true believer of genuine autonomy of minorities and federalism, and its federalist expressions was nothing but for the support from the

minorities in order to beat Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (Song 2000, 110). After 1949, the CCP has never talked about self-determination of minorities and federalism, and to accommodate ethnic diversity, it has adopted a policy of minority regional autonomy, which established three provincial minority autonomous regions and some municipal and county minority autonomous regions. These minority regions, however, have very limited autonomy, and one example would be that their leaders are not elected by local people but appointed or approved by the central government. Meanwhile, since many minorities are religious people, and the CCP, with its atheistic traditions, is not disposed to be tolerant of religions. In fact, the central policies towards the minorities lead to the fact that “minority peoples saw themselves primarily as victims of the dominant race.” (Song 2000, 117-118)

Getting Out of the Dynastic Cycle: From Centralization to Polycentricity

The above discussion suggests that Tocqueville was correct when he characterized China as a perfect example of administrative centralization. His judgement did not only hold for imperial China, but also, even better, applied to modern and contemporary China. The party-state under Mao was an extreme case of administrative centralization, unrivalled in human history. The country is still highly centralized even after forty-years’ reforms.

Without doubt, the long history of administrative centralization is responsible for the cycle of dynasties and long-term stagnation in China. No one understood better than Tocqueville in terms of the disadvantages of administrative centralization. He insightfully pointed out, “administrative centralization is fit only to enervate the peoples who submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish the spirit of the city in them. Administrative centralization, it is true, succeeds in uniting at a given period and in a certain place all the disposable strength of the nation, but it is harmful to the reproduction of strength. It makes [the nation] triumph on the day of combat and diminishes its power in the long term. It can therefore contribute admirably to the passing greatness of one man, not to the lasting prosperity of a people.” (Tocqueville 2000, 83)

For Tocqueville, governmental centralization is necessary for a great country to survive and prosper, but not administrative centralization, because, “A central power, however enlightened, however learned on imagines it, cannot gather to itself alone all the details of the life of a great people. It cannot do it because such a work exceeds human strength. When it wants by its care alone to create so many diverse springs and make them function, it contents itself with a very incomplete result or exhausts itself in useless efforts.” (Tocqueville 2000, 86) In a word, administrative centralization is good at “preventing,” but not at “doing.” (Tocqueville 2000, 86)

In his great study on the French Revolution, Tocqueville (2011) found that administrative centralization under the Old Regime was one of the main factors that led to the Revolution and the only element that survived it. In the Old Regime, the King's Council at the center controlled public administration throughout France, and a single minister was in charge of all public affairs. In each province, a single agent managed all details. "No city, town, village, or hamlet however small, and no hospital, factory, convent, or school anywhere in France, was allowed to manage its private affairs independently or administer its property as it saw fit." (Tocqueville 2011, 54)

This was and is also the case in China. Everything comes from the top, from the center, from Beijing, from one or a few leaders. They make all of the important decisions in public administration throughout the country, and try to manage the society in great details. Such kind of centralization creates many problems, such as poor management of public affairs, lack of local liberty, and passive citizens. It is responsible for the numerous violent uprisings and revolutions and the cycle of dynasties in Chinese history.

Perplexingly, despite the vast territory and enormous diversity in the country, many Chinese and their leaders, in the past two thousand years, has had strong belief that China should be unitary and centralized state. Such kind of belief has been elevated to the level of a "cultural myth", which holds that China has always had a unitary system in her history and the system has been part of Chinese culture. In the long history, the country was frequently torn and split by numerous wars and conflicts, which were often led by powerful local leaders. Thus, many people believe that the unitary system under strong central leadership is indispensable to keep the country united. Under the communist regime, "the unitary myth was reinforced by the Marxist-Leninist commitment to dictatorship and democratic centralism." (Davis 1999)

The Chinese conviction that all power should reside in the central authority has been "one of the most powerful factors in shaping Chinese history." The conviction has preserved a unitary political system in China, and it "has made the Chinese uneasy whenever their culture world has been sundered by contending political authorities." (Pye 1985, 184) But why has the Chinese elevated the unitary and centralized system to a cultural myth? According to Pye (1985, 185-186), at least four factors are responsible for the myth. First, and perhaps the most important, has been the "exaggerated ideal of the great man as leader," whether the emperor, generalissimo, or chairman, and such a man is nothing but an amplification of the Confucian model of the father as the ultimate and omnipotent authority in the family. Second, the strong sense of racial identity, or national identity in modern times, has strengthened the centralization of power. Despite the linguistic and other cultural differences, the Chinese have always thought they have common racial roots. Third, the Chinese people have long had a "near-pathological fear of factionalism and social confusion or disorder." "The Chinese are generally convinced that disaster will follow if brothers fight, if villages have feuds, or if there are factions in their elite politics. Everything should be harmonious, at least on the surface." The Chinese believe that power should not be bifurcated, and fail to appreciate the constructive competition

and pluralism. Finally, the Chinese “have a long and well-established tradition that government and politics should be thought of only in terms of moralistic ideology.” The reason is that “in the socialization process the unrelenting emphasis upon filial piety prevents the Chinese in early life from expressing aggression against the natural targets of authority……”(Pye 1985, 185-186)

Consistent with the myth of the unitary system, many people and literati assumed that the higher and upper layers of the ruling group could know and pursue public interest more objectively, and that the lower levels of officials and common people would be overwhelmed by their private interest. For them, “the higher the official rank, the more objective the view of the public interest,” and “at the very top, only the emperor can ensure that the system as a whole is directed toward public interest.” (Kuhn 1995, 331) Even today, many people still believe the mythical assumption that the central government and higher leaders are benevolent and care about public interest, while the local governments and lower leaders are corrupt and pursue only private interest.

The mythical belief in the unitary system leads many Chinese to the assertion that federalism does not fit with China. First, they argue that China has a long history of the unitary system and no experience of federalism. It is true that China has been a highly centralized unitary state for a long time. The issue, however, is that the long tradition of the unitary system cannot prove that it is most suitable and appropriate to China. In fact, the long history of the unitary system is more likely to be responsible for the autocratic rule and the cycle of dynasties in China.

Second, probably the most important reason for those who are against federalism in China, is that it will lead to separation and disintegration of the country. Many Chinese have a deep fear of “local kingdoms.” In fact, “any surfacing of autonomous power groupings, whether based on geography or on economic or technical achievement, has been taken as a sign of dangerous centrifugal forces. China’s experiences during the decade of civil strife in the warlord era reinforced their distrust of pluralism.” (Pye 1985, 189) “Local kingdoms” or factions breach the Chinese norm of conformity to the supreme authority.

However, is there any evidence indicating that federalism tends to give rise to “local kingdoms”? In fact, it is hard to find. If we take a look at the federalist countries, such as USA, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, and Germany, it is difficult to find the formation of “local kingdoms” in these countries. Instead, we can easily find them in Chinese history with the unitary system. In part, the reason is that China is so vast with a huge population that no single authority is capable of governing the society and penetrating all dimensions of the polity (Pye 1985, 190). From the perspective of information and knowledge, the central government in a large country is not able to collect all the necessary information and knowledge to make policies that are applied to everywhere, since the information and knowledge necessary for decision making are in the hands of numerous individuals. In other words, the centralized system is difficult to work, because the center is unable to

obtain “the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place” that is dissipated among individuals (Hayek 1945).

Today, many Chinese forget the debate on the federalist movement in the 1920s, and in the debate, some scholars articulated the disadvantages of the unitary and centralized system and favor for federalism. For instance, Hu Shi, the leading intellectual at that time, argued that China was too large for the centralized and unitary system, and that imposed order by force would always give way to disintegration. Real unity had always come only when the rulers began to rely on good government in the localities rather than the imposed order from the center. He indicated that not federalism and local autonomy but the attempt to impose unity militarily created the divisions of warlordism, and that instead federalism and genuine local autonomy would lead gradually to a secure knitting together of the country (Waldron 1990, 122-124).

Since federalism has been fiercely criticized as a “bourgeois reformist strategy” by the communist regime after 1949 and regarded as a taboo and sensitive word in Chinese political discourse and even in academic research (Song 2000, 111), it is no wonder that there are so many misunderstandings and confusions about the institutional value of federalism. In fact, if the Chinese have a better understanding of the features and advantages of federalism, they would be highly likely to agree that federalism can provide a viable way for getting out of the cycle of dynasties in China and helping the country achieve democratic transformation.

As a political system, federalism can help China move away from the authoritarian and centralized government. Federalism is an institutional arrangement that prevents either central government or local governments from becoming dominant and autocratic, as American founding fathers remarkably appreciated (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2001). The logic is that all powers should be checked and balanced, and, in Madison’s words, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2001, 268)

At the same time, federalism is aimed at constituting a polycentric order that facilitates numerous individuals and organizations to participate in decision-making process over public affairs (Ostrom 1991; 1999), it will be helpful to transform the authoritarian regime into a democratic one. One function of federalism is to promote local self-government and local liberty, which is the foundation of democracy (Tocqueville 2000), and to adopt federalism in China would help the country lay the foundation for democratic transformation from the bottom up, which is more likely to be incremental and peaceful rather than radical and violent.

At the same time, federalism is conducive to sustainable economic development and growth in China. Since economic development, to a large extent, relies on local initiatives and local knowledge, which requires a decentralized structure, the federal arrangement would encourage local experiments and innovations and narrowly-tailored policies. In

addition, if China espouses a federal system, the minorities, including the Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongols, would be much more likely to live peacefully with the Han people, since the minorities can have genuine local autonomy and self-government.

Conclusion

Although Tocqueville had never traveled to China, he understood the key feature of Chinese political system. China has been a highly centralized state since the establishment of Qin dynasty over 2000 years ago. In imperial era, the emperors were the supreme and all-powerful authority, and they governed the country by controlling the appointments of local magistrates and imposing “sacred orders.” On the other hand, since there was no formal government below the county level at that time, local society, to some extent, was actually ruled by the gentry and elites.

When the imperial government was removed in 1912, the country witnessed some remarkable experiments of local self-government and provincial autonomy in the early Republican period. Unfortunately, the Kuomintang’s campaign to unify the country through military force buried the self-government movement, and the continent was recentralized soon.

After the communist regime took root in 1949, the country, especially under Mao, has become most centralized and totalitarian the Chinese have ever seen. Since the late 1970s, the reforms under Deng and his successors have pushed the country to move toward decentralization to a limited degree, but the party-state is still highly centralized.

The strong belief in the unitary and centralized system has been lifted to a “cultural myth” in China, and many Chinese assumes that only the unitary system is fit with the history and greatness of the country. It seems not easy to overcome the myth and to change the nature of the central-local relations in the centuries-old civilization. However, the unitary and centralized regime is confronted with daunting challenges, including local protectionism, the unrest in minority regions, and so on. To overcome these challenges, to avoid violent revolutions, and to get out of the cycle of dynasties, China needs to adopt federalism and establishes a polycentric order. The federal system can help the country achieve socioeconomic development, peaceful relationship among different ethnic groups, and democratic transformation.

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