

## Global power shifts and the future of democracy: an evolutionary approach, with special attention to China

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# WZB

Berlin Social Science Center



John M. Owen

## **GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY**

An Evolutionary Approach, with Special Attention  
to China

**Discussion Paper**

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Abstract

**GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY  
An Evolutionary Approach, with Special Attention to China**

by John M. Owen\*

How may we best understand the effects of the ongoing rise of China on the future of liberal democracy in East Asia? Scholars who stress hegemony tend to predict a less democratic region, while those who stress diffusion tend to predict more democracy. This paper does not attempt to resolve the question, but argues for the use of evolutionary logic to help us with general questions concerning the regional and global waxing and waning of domestic regime types. Evolution's claims about the variety, selection, and retention of traits (in this case, democracy), rightly understood, can accommodate not only the standard international diffusion mechanisms of competition, learning, and emulation, but also that of coercion. The concepts of co-evolution and niche construction are crucial: an agent may modify its environment such that one or more traits of that agent enjoy a greater reproductive advantage. Agency, then, may be not an escape from evolution but a participation in co-evolution. Intentionally or not, rulers of states may construct niches that affect the longevity of the regime through which they rule. Intentional niche constructors may promote their domestic regime, or block the advance of a threatening regime, in their own state or their neighbors via various means. I consider phenomena to which evolutionary logic would direct us concerning China and Asia today, and suggest that China's leaders are engaging in domestic and regional niche construction to preserve the power monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party.

*Keywords: Regime type, evolution, co-evolution, niche, China*

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\* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Utrikespolitiska Institutet in Stockholm, PRIF/HSFK in Frankfurt, and GIGA in Hamburg. The author thanks those in attendance for comments. He also thanks Thomas Risse and the Center for Transnational Relations, Foreign and Security Policy at the Free University of Berlin, and Michael Zürn and the Global Governance Group at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, for hosting him while he researched and wrote this paper. He thanks the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for helping to make possible his research stay in Germany.

Zusammenfassung

## **GLOBALE MACHTVERÄNDERUNG UND DIE ZUKUNFT DER DEMOKRATIE Ein Evolutionsansatz mit besonderem Fokus auf China**

by John M. Owen\*

Wie können wir am besten die Auswirkungen des fortlaufenden Aufstiegs Chinas auf die Zukunft der liberalen Demokratie in Ostasien verstehen? Während jene Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler, die vor allem auf Hegemonie fokussieren, dazu neigen, eine weniger demokratische Region vorherzusagen, prognostizieren solche, die auf Diffusion abstellen, mehr Demokratie. Der vorliegende Artikel beabsichtigt nicht, diese Frage zu beantworten, sondern plädiert stattdessen für die Anwendung einer evolutionären Logik, die es ermöglicht, allgemeine Fragen der regionalen und globalen Veränderung staatlicher Regimetypen zu erklären. Evolutionäre Thesen über die Varianz, Selektion und Beibehaltung bestimmter Merkmale (hier der Demokratie), können nicht nur die üblichen Mechanismen internationaler Diffusion wie Wettbewerb, Lernen und Emulation fassen, sondern auch den Mechanismus des Zwangs. Die Konzepte der Koevolution und Nischenkonstruktion sind hier entscheidend: Ein Agent kann seine Umgebung modifizieren, sodass eines oder mehrere seiner Merkmale einen größeren Reproduktionsvorteil genießen. Agency kann demnach verstanden werden nicht als ein Ausweg aus der Evolution, sondern als ein Teilnehmen am Prozess der Koevolution. Die einen Staat Regierenden können – absichtlich oder unabsichtlich – Nischen konstruieren, welche die Lebensdauer des Regimes beeinflussen. Akteure, die intentional Nischen konstruieren, können das eigene Regime fördern oder den Aufstieg eines sie bedrohenden Regimes im eigenen oder auch in benachbarten Staaten mit verschiedenen Mitteln blockieren. Vorliegend werden in Bezug auf das heutige China und Asien solche Phänomene betrachtet, auf die eine evolutionäre Logik unseren Blick lenken würde. Die Analyse lässt darauf schließen, dass Chinas Führung sowohl innerstaatlich als auch auf regionaler Ebene Nischen schafft, um das Machtmonopol der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas aufrecht zu erhalten.

*Schlüsselwörter: Regimetypp, Evolution, Koevolution, Nische, China*

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*China does not export revolution.*

Xi Jinping, Mexico, 2009

What will the rise of China, now slowed but far from stopped, mean for the future of liberal democracy in Asia? The answer may well be “nothing,” but a growing number of empirical studies claims that hegemons have influence over the predominant regime type in their regions. Democracy is more likely to spread across a region that has a democratic hegemon (Cederman and Gleditsch; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Boix 2011; Gunitsky 2014). The same may be true of other regime types (Owen 2010; Gunitsky n.d.), and analysts have picked up on worries among democrats in Asia and elsewhere that somehow China’s power will weaken democracy in the region (Lee 2015; Kurlantzick 2016). On the other hand, a large literature, growing out of some claims of Kant from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, points to the general proposition that the past two centuries have seen episodic but unmistakable growth in the number of liberal democracies, and that such states enjoy advantages in international relations: they do not fight one another, allowing them to reap the benefits of peace among a growing number of states (Doyle 1983; Russett 1992; Owen 1997); they win the wars they do fight (Lake 1992; Reiter and Stam 2002); they trade more with one another; they join and remain in more international institutions (Russett and Oneal 2001); more generally, they are better at keeping international commitments (Martin 2000; Lipson 2013); they enjoy advantages in coercive international bargaining owing to their superior ability to generate audience costs (Fearon 1994) or their transparency (Schultz 1999).

The future of democracy in the region is important not only for the people who live there now and in the future, but (as the Kantian literature suggests) also for the prospects for security and cooperation in the region and with the rest of the world, particularly democracies. But regarding that future, we have here two theses that point in opposite directions. An argument from hegemony would imply that China’s rise will mean fewer democracies and more authoritarian states in East and Southeast Asia. As literature on authoritarian diffusion would put it, China could be a “black knight” (Ambrosio 2009; Vanderhill 2013; Risse and Babayan 2015). On the other hand, the Kantian literature would suggest that any Chinese effect will be small and temporary, and indeed that China itself will eventually succumb to the selection advantages that accrue to democracies and become one itself.

In this paper I shall not try to settle this question. Instead, I shall propose a way to synthesize the theories behind these two theses by means of evolutionary logic, with the hope of making inquiry into the question more productive. The Kantian thesis is more obviously connected to evolution: it explains the growth of the number of democracies with the advantages of democracy in today's international system. More broadly, historians often consider Kant a precursor to Darwin (Lovejoy 1910). An evolutionary account of the international spread (or, for that matter, the contraction) of democracy would stress the spread of ideas and institutions by learning. Agents wanting to preserve and extend their power are boundedly rational and hence do not invent regimes out of whole cloth every time a new problem appears. Instead, agents inherit ideas and regimes and learn from experience – their own and others' – what best helps them reach their goals. Agents who refuse to learn lose power to those who do; thus sometimes evolution produces revolution. Regimes are thereby selected and retained in a set of states according to their fitness. In other words agents adapt to their environment and the environment has a strong role in selection.

Hegemony, on the other hand, seems anti-evolutionary at first glance, inasmuch as the hegemon by definition has more power and hence more agency. The limiting case would be a hegemon able to design its region by imposing regimes, national borders, etc. on its region. Of course, such extreme hegemonic control is probably impossible, and would better be termed formal imperialism. Whatever hegemony China or its leaders exert would instead be agency under various constraints. When we see agents adapting to their environment, we should think about evolution. Evolutionary theory always has recognized the agency of units (organisms or otherwise), but conceives of units as using that agency to shape their environment. The shaped environment, in turn, may shape agents by selecting for certain traits. This mutual shaping by agent and environment is *niche construction* (Odling-Smee et al. 2003). Niche construction may be intentional or not. Either way, inasmuch as the shaped environment still selects for certain traits in agents, niche construction it is not an escape from or thwarting of evolution, but participation in co-evolution. The general implication of evolutionary theory for international or regional hegemony is that it is constrained but consequential. Even in a world where democracy appears to have overall selection advantages, China's leaders could suppress those advantages in their own country and region, directly and indirectly, and thereby extend the life of authoritarian regimes, including their own.



It is an empirical question whether China's rulers are actually constructing a niche. Evolution is not a deductive theory that makes point predictions. It is rather a paradigm that aids theory and research by identifying agents, constraints, and mechanisms. Evolution should not be pitted against the main IR theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, for evolution can accommodate propositions from each of them (e.g., coercion from realism, institutional constraints from liberalism, and learning from constructivism). To explain outcomes, evolutionary logic needs to be supplemented with descriptions of the properties and preferences of actors and the properties of environments. Evolution is an obvious framework, however, for the analysis of complex systems with significant unintended consequences and feedback effects (Jervis 1997, 48-50). It has the potential to help explain the uneven spread of democracy across time and space. As I elaborate below, social scientists have found evolutionary logic fruitful in understanding complex systems of culture, language, and economics, among others.

I shall argue that rulers and aspiring rulers adapt to their environments by learning from observation in their own state and other states. They attend to what appear "best practices" because their rationality is bounded; they have limited cognitive and material resources and must rely on rules of thumb, authorities, and other shortcuts (Simon 1982). In particular, elites tend to try to copy states that win important wars, sustain economic growth, and maintain domestic stability over time. Elites copy not only the policies of these successful states but their basic institutions or regimes. In some periods of history one regime appears to elites nearly the world over as best; in the 1930s it was fascism, in the 1980s and 1990s liberal democracy. But because change is costly and rationality is bounded, agents sometimes resist or cannot identify the optimal type of regime, and copy instead what appears the best regime under the circumstances. Which point brings us to East Asia, a region in which there is no unambiguously best regime today. China's Market Leninism clearly has enjoyed great success and a transnational following. But liberal democracy retains a great deal of prestige across the region as well, including within China itself, and it is clear that the current leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fear liberal democracy as a threat to their power. Through various policies, the CCP leadership is constructing a niche in intentional and unintentional ways that will affect the future of democracy in East Asia. Intentional niche construction includes suppression of democratic movements within China and efforts to build and shape international institutions so as to remove liberal biases. Unintentional niche construction includes setting an example of the success of Market-Leninism by sustaining economic growth and industrialization and

preserving political stability. (I do not consider niche construction by the United States or other states in Asia.)

This paper has three main sections. First, I argue that evolutionary logic provides a helpful framework for understanding the progress and regress of various regime types over time and space. In particular, it can incorporate both broad selection advantages of liberal democracy and a role for hegemony in countering those advantages, including coercion, demonstration effects, and externalities. Second, I argue that evolution implies that states, or their rulers, feel pressure to adopt the regime that appears to have fitness advantages in the current international system, but that those rulers may attempt to construct a niche that allows their own regime to continue to flourish. Finally, I consider the current situation of China, whose regime faces a persistent liberal-democratic threat in its region and whose rulers are indirectly constructing a niche to preserve the regime.

### **Why Evolution?**

In this paper, the unit of analysis is regime type, not state or international system. To be explained is variation in the relative frequency of particular regime types across countries over time. Regimes are not the same as policies: a policy is a set of rules to solve a specific problem, such as privatization, whereas a regime is a complex of meta-rules – rules about rules – intended to solve the general problem of public order, such as capitalism. Regimes are ideal types and include liberal democracy, absolute monarchy, Marxism-Leninism, and Islamist theocracy. In practice they may not be mutually exclusive; e.g., a social democracy might combine elements of liberalism and Marxism. I treat states as vehicles of regimes, analogous to organisms in biological evolution, and states' rulers and other elites as encoders, analogous to genetic material. With the majority of social scientists who use evolutionary logic, I am concerned with cultural rather than biological evolution – i.e., I make no claims about how human genes affect or are affected by political regimes or struggles.<sup>1</sup>

Why use an evolutionary framework to help explain changes in the distribution across space and time of various regime types? Evolutionary accounts are most often contrasted to accounts that posit rational design and that bracket inheritance, copying, and so on. As I

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<sup>1</sup> Ambitious natural and social scientists are working to build links between biological and cultural evolution; see Lewontin 2000; Laland et al. 2000; Boyd et al. 2011. For an application of evolutionary psychology to international relations see Thayer 2000. Evolutionary psychology and sociobiology recognize no feedback effects from culture to biology (Odling-Smee et al. 2003), and so my argument is quite different from that of Thayer.

argue at length below, evolution as applied to culture can incorporate intentional agents and their ideas, so it would be an extreme rational-design hypothesis that was free of evolutionary taint. An evolution-free hypothesis concerning changes in the relative frequency of regimes in a region would claim that a rational agent designs and implements the regimes within each country. This agent would be said to decide at every moment to leave the institutions alone or to modify them without selection pressure from its material or social environment, including bounded rationality and learning from others' examples, and without pressure to retain the institutions already in place. The agent would have perfect information and calculate flawlessly. It would be completely able to implement its decisions, deciding moment by moment whether democracy, fascism, absolute monarchy, or some other option was best for its interests.

This caricature may seem to offer a low bar to evolutionary accounts,<sup>2</sup> and that is the point: once one understands what evolutionary theory implies about how political institutions arise, spread, are maintained, and die, then even casual observation of the distribution of regime types makes an evolutionary framework hard to resist. Many regime types have existed in history and that the relative predominance of various types has varied – i.e., the distribution of regime types has varied across time and space. Some regimes once dominant in one or more regions, such as absolute monarchy or fascism, have virtually disappeared. New regimes, such as liberal democracy, have appeared and gradually gained predominance in certain regions at particular times. It is not the case that agents have engineered the entire process by which domestic regimes wax and wane internationally. Instead, we discern the three hallmarks of evolution (Hodgson and Knudsen 2006): *variety* (of regimes), *selection* (some regimes become predominant while most languish or die off), and *retention* (regime types can remain after the specific circumstances in which they arose have changed).

Indeed, the strongest reason to use an explicitly evolutionary framework is that the majority of scholarship on the international spread, persistence, and contraction of democracy in world politics appeals to mechanisms that are consistent with Darwinian logic. What evolutionary thinking does is unite these mechanisms in a coherent framework. It is standard in the literature on policy diffusion to distinguish four mechanisms by which practices spread across states: competition, learning, emulation (socialization), and coercion (Simmons et al. 2006; Graham et al. 2012). Each of these is

analytically separate, but the four may be folded into a unified evolutionary logic. Clearly competition, learning, and imitation are all part of what we mean when we say that domestic regimes evolve. States competing for scarce resources have incentives to become more efficient at securing those resources. States also have incentives to learn from or imitate the successes and failures they observe in other states. The mechanism of coercion may seem outside of evolutionary logic, but as I show below it may be folded in under the label of niche construction. The point of using an explicitly evolutionary is not to obscure the distinctions among these four mechanisms, but rather to place them within a wider explanatory context that shows how they relate to one another.

Second, and related, it is clear that state rulers and aspiring rulers seek out ideas and information about how to have a more successful state, where success is measured by some combination of stability, security, wealth, and prestige. North Korea is distinctive today precisely because it is anomalous; to one extent or another all other states monitor, learn from, and imitate other states' successes and failures, including their regimes. In evolutionary terms, this means that ideas and practices, including those concerning regime type, "reproduce" and "survive" based on how well agents believe they fit current circumstances. For example, the First World War was won by a coalition dominated by liberal democracies (Great Britain, France, and the United States), and in the years following the war liberal democracies multiplied in Europe – Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Finland, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This flowering of democracy was not a result, at least directly, of coercion by the victorious allies. Rather, the years following the war saw a "vogue for democracy" in Europe (Thomson 1962, 588-600).

Third, evolution's assumptions are relatively weak. Selection mechanisms in evolution do not require the strong axioms of rationality – perfect information and perfect ability to calculate – that have called into question standard rational choice and game-theoretic approaches. Hence evolution does not imply that units divine or practice the universally optimal strategy, whatever that may be. The claim is more modest: whatever traits become predominant are the best among available alternatives at mitigating some local problem, and may in the long run bring other, even worse problems (Hodgson and Knudsen 2006, 5). Agents need only be "boundedly rational," with limited resources and thus incentives to use heuristics and other shortcuts to making decisions. As concern a state's domestic

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<sup>2</sup> The research program on the rational design of international institutions is predicated on the notion that institutions evolve, but the emphasis there is on agents' responses to environmental

regime, elites cannot achieve absolute certainty about the superiority of one regime type; they can only observe what works and what does not within their purview. As the failures of European democracy in the 1930s attest, the winning regime type may prove less competitive at time  $t+1$  than agents thought at time  $t$ .

Fourth, for many years disciplines outside of biology have profited by importing evolutionary logic. One need not accept the ambitious claims of “Universal Darwinism” – that all complex systems are adequately explained by evolution – to acknowledge that the mechanisms of variation, selection, and inheritance help explain outcomes in many domains, including language (Berwick and Chomsky 2016), the practices of organizations (Nelson and Winter 1982; Aldrich 1999), and technology (Dafoe 2015). Like most social scientists who use evolutionary logic, I bracket genetics and scale up to a higher level of analysis, taking regime type as the unit of analysis. Thus my argument falls under the label of cultural or social evolution (Boyd and Richerson 1985). Scholars have used evolutionary logic to explain the emergence of international rules and practices (Modelski 1990; Florini 1996; Wendt 1999; Barnett 2009), of globalization (Modelski et al. 2007), of sovereign states (Spruyt 1994; Viola et al. 2015), and of world politics itself (Kahler 1999; Tang 2016). Other scholars, cited below, have used evolutionary logic to explain the global spread of democracy and peace.

Some object to the application of evolution to social phenomena because the latter involve agents with intentions, whereas Darwinian evolution involves genes (which cannot think) disciplined by a purposeless environment. The introduction of rationality in agents and purpose into the environment would then mean a completely different and separate logic. But this objection does not appreciate the expansiveness of evolution. Lewontin notes that organisms, conscious and intentional or not, act upon their environment, and sometimes thereby affect their own evolution: “... the environments of organisms are made by the organisms themselves as a consequence of their own life activities” (Lewontin 1983, 280). As Hodgson and Knudsen (2006, 11-12) write, the line between animal and human intentionality is difficult to draw. Another objection would be that “evolution” might connote claims about progress (including moral progress), and in world politics an inexorable movement of the human race toward universal liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992). But evolution need not rely on teleology and, as I argue below, can easily accommodate both movements away from liberal democracy and countries and entire regions that resist democracy.

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pressures. Koremenos et al. 2001, 766-68.

Evolutionary logic, of course, brings some hazards. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, which divided humanity into allegedly natural races analogous to species and posited a survival of the fittest, still casts a long shadow (Offer, ed., 2000). As Spencer's critics during his own time understood, some aspects of his appropriation of Darwinism did not necessarily follow from the theory. Spencer and others thought that evolution necessarily implied progress (with baleful normative consequences), a view that Darwin himself was to abandon (Toulmin 2000, 92-93). Further, handled carelessly, evolutionary logic can produce unfalsifiable just-so stories. A phenotype survives, we say, because it was most fit; but if we identify fitness by survival, we are arguing in a circle. More broadly, there is a reason why structural-functional explanations were routed years ago by rational choice: the former took structures to be agents and could not provide convincing micro-foundations for their claims. As I hope to show, however, evolutionary accounts can both link the micro to the macro and can yield empirically testable propositions concerning information about fitness, learning, pressure to conform, and niche construction.

### **Evolution and Regime Types**

As Huntley (1996) has noted, an evolutionary logic was implied in the famous argument of Kant about perpetual peace (1795). IR scholars today know Kant's essay mainly for its claim that republics will form a league of peace and international law. But Huntley notes that, for Kant, the trend toward republicanism and peace is generated by fear of violence in the state of nature – that is, by the dangerous social environment in which states interact. As war becomes more violent and counter-productive, more and more people will demand that their states set up institutions that guarantee that the national interest (rather than the interests of the elites) are served; namely, republican institutions. A Hobbesian state of nature, in other words, selects for a growing league of republics.

More recently, a number of scholars have built on this basic insight concerning liberal democracies. Mitchell et al. (1999) model interactions between domestic regimes and international outcomes, and find that (as Kant would expect) war tends to be followed by democratization and more democracies decreases the number of wars. Cederman and Gleditsch (2004) note that democratic transitions tend to cluster in time and space, and argue for the co-evolution of democracy and peace in regions. In their model, so long as democracies practice collective security (defending one another when attacked), democracy spreads in a geographically proximate set of states. Other literature, meanwhile, attends closely to mechanisms through which democratizations cluster. Many of these works argue for *diffusion*, or the spread of democracy from state to state (Starr 1991; Brinks and

Coppedge 2006). Although evolution could help explain the clustering of regime transitions across states without diffusion – selection by the states’ environment still would be operating – it would be difficult to account for the clustering of transitions to the *same* regime type. Why would the environment select for liberal democracy specifically, in state after state, unless people in those states are imitating other states?

When we say that evolution helps cause a given international distribution of regime types – democracy, fascism, monarchy, etc. – what do we mean? In keeping with the three hallmarks of evolution (variety, selection, retention), we mean that:

- 1) A *variety* of regime types exists across an international system (regional or global).
- 2) States *retain* regimes as power seekers and their supporters inherit the ideology and regime and pass it on.
- 3) States, constrained by scarce resources, *select* the particular regime that seems most successful at addressing the challenges that their domestic and/or international environment imposes upon them.

In what follows I lay out a simple evolutionary story about how a particular domestic regime comes to be predominant. I then complicate the account with more finely grained attention to agents and power via the concept of niche construction.

### ***Variety***

Evolution may explain the initial emergence of particular regime types, e.g., how Russia became communist (rather than something else) in 1918, which would require analysis of how Marxism-Leninism came into being and triumphed over its anarchist and socialist competitors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. No doubt selection and retention were heavily involved. I am leaving off the initial emergence of ideologies and regimes, however, and beginning with the fact of regime and ideological diversity across states. Globally, we see a wide variety of regimes. Today most regions are dominated by one regime type, e.g., Europe and the Americas by liberal democracy, the Persian Gulf by monarchies. One reason why East Asia is so interesting is its current regime heterogeneity: it comprises liberal democracies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia), a democratizing state (Burma), a military dictatorship (Thailand), market-Leninist states (China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), and an opaque, but evidently absolute, dictatorship (North Korea).

## **Retention**

Regimes do change, and change is what we are trying to explain. But change is less common than stasis, and evolution has a well-developed account of the retention of traits. In biology, genetic material is passed on and inherited when the phenotype it produces enjoys a reproductive advantage. Cheetahs are fast because they inherit the genetic material that enables speed. In cultural evolution, ideas, practices, and institutions are reproduced. In social phenomena, however, the concept of “reproduction” is not quite the same as in biology. People who live under an advantageous institution are not necessarily going to have more surviving offspring, nor will those children have imprinted into their genes a preference for that institution. Institutions instead are reproduced over time and across people through habit, example, education, and path-dependency, or the collective investment by groups in them (Pierson 2000). Cultural “traits,” such as institutions, are passed on through culture. Cultural evolution, then, employs a kind of Lamarckian logic in which acquired traits (such as institutions) are passed on. Some skeptics of cultural evolution have disqualified it from consideration for this reason. Hodgson and Knudsen (2006, 14-15) have argued persuasively, however, that Lamarckism is a red herring: Darwin himself admitted the possibility that acquired traits could be genetically passed on. In any case, as I noted earlier, my concern is not to trace the retention of political regimes to human alleles.

The important point is that a political regime is not perpetually being invented by the people who live under it. Thomas Jefferson believed that every generation has the right to a new set of laws; no generation can bind its successor to its constitution.<sup>3</sup> But Jefferson, a consummate rationalist, was unrealistic. A better depiction of why a country’s regime is as it is comes from his contemporary Edmund Burke, for whom a society’s laws were an accumulation of wisdom over ages.<sup>4</sup> Even in the United States, with its attachment to novelty, the constitution, laws, and judicial interpretations are inherited and passed on. Regimes normally change only gradually.

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<sup>3</sup> Jefferson’s formula was “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living,” meaning the living ought not to harm those yet to be born. Jefferson, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Thus Burke: “As the ends of such a partnership [i.e., a society] cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” Burke 1909.



## **Selection**

But regimes do change, and we want to know how they do so. Evolutionary theory points to the mechanism of selection under competitive pressure. Cheetahs inherit speed because antelope are scarce and, over time, slow cheetahs had fewer offspring because they were less able to catch antelopes. Slowness was selected out of the cheetah's genetic material; speed was selected for. Likewise, states live in a world of scarcity: material goods, time, and prestige all are limited. The regimes that survive are those best able to help states address their local scarcity; those selected out are less able to meet their rulers' needs. Thus China began to jettison Maoist state socialism in the late 1970s because it was failing. At a maximum, states that do not select the best available regime may die. States do die (Fazal 2007). It is difficult to deny that the Soviet Union disappeared owing at least in part to its inability to compete with the United States, and that the Soviets' communist regime, which by the 1970s was unable to innovate and carry on the impressive economic and technological growth of the 1950s, was partly responsible (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000; Owen and Poznansky 2014). Gorbachev's attempt to adopt a version of democratic capitalism (roughly, European-style social democracy) came too late, but what matters here is his attempt at imitation.

To say that evolutionary logic rejects the strong assumptions of rational choice theory does not mean that it posits agents that are not purposive. The claim instead is that the scarcity of resources sets bounds on agents' rationality (Simon 1982). States cannot have perfect information about which regimes work best in their particular circumstances. Thus they have incentives to seek out information about various regime types, actual and potential, interpret the resulting information, and follow what appear to be virtuous examples. Bounded rationality also implies that they will not necessarily select the best option. States adapt to their environment in what they take to be the optimal way (i.e., what will best serve their interests as they conceive of them), but their choices are heavily conditioned by that same environment and may even harm them. They must halt their search for the best option at some point, and they cannot know with certainty that the point is optimal (Callebaut 2007); the decision as to when to halt the search may partly be a function of the agent's environment (e.g., an ideology pressed upon him by a group to which he belongs).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Agents are free, of course, to ignore how other states address their problems and how far they succeed or fail. In today's world, North Korea's regime comes closest to that kind of willful ignorance. That country's condition as a self-impoverishing pariah intermittently extorting aid from the United States and China is the exception that proves the rule; it reinforces the notion that agents do better when they try to learn from other states.

Use of evolutionary logic to explain changes in the distribution of regimes across states points us to the importance of information in selection as well as retention. China and the Soviet Union alike gathered information about how state socialism was working vis-à-vis its alternatives, chiefly capitalism or a market-based economy. They compared their own statistics with those of the United States and other Western countries and (in China's case) with Singapore, which managed to combine single-party rule with capitalism and growth. New regimes do appear abruptly, as the appearance of the Soviet Union itself in 1917 shows. Normally, however, bounded rationality requires states to select from an existing menu of regimes.

## **Two Complications**

Thus far, the story would seem to be that agents inherit state regimes and select a new regime for their state when new information about which regimes make for success and which for failure becomes available. This story is too simple, of course. We know two things from the literature on regime change, particularly on democratization. First, when a regime changes, elites seldom agree that the change is desirable; those who rule under the old regime want to keep it (perhaps reformed) and often fight to do so. Thus a finely grained evolutionary treatment needs to go to a lower level of analysis, that of agents. Agents – individuals and groups – vary in utility function and capability, and a state's selection and retention of a regime type will involve their struggles, sometimes to the point of violence and revolution.

Second, power is unevenly distributed among states, and big countries or hegemons often interfere with the regime choices of elites in smaller states. A hegemon intervenes through various means, from overt military intervention to covert action to economic sanctions to rhetoric, to see that smaller states have the regime it wants. Hegemons and their environments co-evolve.

## ***Agents and Regime Change***

It is agents who retain and select regimes for states, agents who pass on and inherit the practices of which regimes consist, agents who gather information about which regimes work and which do not. Agents must be part of an adequate evolutionary account because agents are not all the same with respect to preferences or capabilities. In a given country, most people would assert that they favor what is best for their country, but the fact that they often disagree on which regime is best means that we must look at their struggles to

retain and change regimes. We also must attend to their different capacities to affect their state's regime type.

Owing to different origins and tastes, some people want much more power and public influence than others. Some are politically ambitious – either those with what Machiavelli called *virtù*, who want to rule, or those who care deeply about public order and justice and believe they can have a salutary effect on those things – while others care more about goods such as art, family life, sensual pleasure, or devotion to God. Roughly, I mean the standard social-scientific distinction between elites (power seekers) and the public. Elites – actual and aspiring rulers and their advisors – care much more about ruling and hence about regimes, and so devote many more resources to gathering and interpreting information about the relative performance of regimes. To preserve the regime that enables their rule, they monitor the successes and failures of other states and implement changes accordingly. The public, by comparison, is far less engaged in political questions during normal times.

Elites, of course, want a scarce good – power – and so compete with one another. Thus they inevitably disagree over policy and sometimes the political regime itself. They compete for power in part by vying for the loyalty of constituencies such as the military, police, business community, clergy, bureaucracy, media, and general public. One way elites demonstrate their legitimacy to their constituents is through ideological consistency, or loyalty to the same regime regardless of circumstances. If a monarchist changes her mind and becomes a republican, her credibility will suffer, as monarchists will regard her as a traitor and republicans will question her sincerity; she will bear audience costs (Fearon 1994). Thus, although elites may change their minds about which regime is best, normally they will be consistent. Elites in power under an extant regime thus will have a stake in the retention of that regime.

Hence regime change typically will happen not when elites change their minds about which regime is best, but rather when the balance of power among elites in a country shifts (Gleditsch and Ward 2006, 912; Risse and Babayan 2015). In the modal case a monarchy will become a republic not when the king becomes a republican, but when republicans gain power at the expense of monarchists. That happens when elites with less of a stake in monarchy per se gain confidence in the efficacy of republicanism and lose confidence in the efficacy of monarchy. Those energized elites then try to rally the public to the new ideology. Even when elites change their minds, as when democrats become

authoritarians, normally they will do so when they judge the balance of power within the country has shifted in favor of the challenger regime.

To return to the logics of retention and selection: *the balance of ideological power within a country can shift when new information becomes available about the relative success of various regime types*. When a republic unexpectedly wins an important war over a monarchy, or the republic's economy develops rapidly over a sustained period while the economies of monarchies stagnate, republicanism gains credibility across states and monarchy loses credibility (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Miller n.d.). Elites who favor republicanism will have new moral and material capability and will attempt to rally the public to their cause and force a regime change.

### **Niche Construction**

This paper opened with a question: How might the rise of China affect the prospects for democracy in East Asia? Recent studies find that hegemonic states can have significant influence over the regime types of their smaller neighbors (Owen 2010, Boix 2012, Gunitzky 2014). It might seem that hegemony's effects on the distribution of domestic regimes across states are outside of evolution, inasmuch as the hegemon is overriding the retention and selection mechanisms outlined above. But in the natural world power, understood as the ability to influence outcomes, is unevenly distributed as well, and organisms routinely shape their environments in their favor. Thus the concept of *niche construction*. To say that agents build niches is to say that they shape their environment, intentionally or not, such that it will select for and retain traits, behaviors, or institutions. Often niches benefit their constructors. Earthworms consume and excrete the soil they burrow in, thereby altering its properties to favor more plant growth, which in turn benefits the earthworms by giving them more plant litter. In enriching soil over generations, earthworms cause the soil to select for a particular epidermis structure in earthworms themselves. Niches may also harm their constructors. The larger point is that feedback loops connect environmental changes, phenotypes, and genes (Odling-Smee et al. 2003, 11-12). For original Darwinism the environment was exogenous to evolution, inasmuch as the properties it selected for were not affected by living things, and in general sociobiology and evolutionary psychology retain this assumption of exogeneity. More recent thinking on evolution has endogenized the environment, seeing it as co-evolving with agents (Lewontin 2000; Odling-Smee et al. 2003, 242-44).

As biologists have endogenized environment with agency, so should those of us studying political regimes in world politics. Human agents attempt to alter their environments so as to solve problems they face, and the altered environment can feed back into the traits of the agents, causing certain properties to be selected (Jervis 1997: 48-50). The process happens domestically: when republicans find themselves with more power and effect regime change, the new republican regime empowers republicans in the future, who in turn use their power to reinforce the republican regime.

But of greater interest is an international hegemon that affects this process, i.e., that willy-nilly shifts the balance of power in a smaller state from supporters of one regime to supporters of another. State rulers always have an interest in a friendly international environment, in particular neighbors whose policies are helpful to their purposes. Leaders of a democratic hegemon may prefer democracies, because democracies do not fight one another (Doyle 1983, Owen 1997) and generally are more reliable partners (Lipson 2004). Leaders of a capitalist hegemon tend to want economies open to foreign trade and investment. Rulers of a communist hegemon may want neighbors whose economies they can plan and control. Rulers of any hegemon will want to degrade domestic ideological threats and foreign ideological enemies (Owen 2010, 45-46). If selection pressures favor their own regime type, they may spread their regime abroad. If pressures favor a competing regime type, they may simply try to block the spread of that regime. Rulers may use a variety of means (Börzel and Risse 2012), including military action (invasion, air strikes, special forces), covert action, economic sanctions, capacity building, externalities (e.g., constructing international rules that reward states with the desired regime), and rhetoric.

Clever leaders of a hegemon no doubt will use all available tools that they believe will be efficacious; e.g., they will not invade the target if they believe that domestic or international resistance would make invasion counter-productive. That leads to the first sense in which a regime-promoting hegemon's leaders are participating in evolution: they must adapt their policies to the environment they are trying to shape. The hegemon's rulers will find that the environment selects for some tools and against some others. Second, in shaping the regional or international environment via regime promotions, the hegemon's rulers are trying to set up a feedback loop to their own state, one that makes it more likely that its own regime will be retained over time, precisely because regime retention means power retention for them. Agency and structure are endogenous, even with great powers (cf. Braumoeller 2013).

Hegemonic influence also may be less direct and even unintentional, e.g., by inspiring emulation or learning in unanticipated places, or by inadvertently creating or empowering particular agents in smaller states. The victorious powers of the First World War implemented the Wilsonian principle of self-determination to break up the Austrian, German, and Turkish empires, but the message was received in the British and French empires as well. Delcour and Wolczuk (2015) find that Russian attempts to block democratization in Georgia and Ukraine have backfired by mobilizing countering forces in favor of democracy.

### **China and Asia: Expectations of an Evolutionary Approach**

We return, at last, to the current case of China and its region. To what kinds of phenomena would an evolutionary approach direct our attention?

#### ***Selection and Retention***

Evolutionary logic implies that boundedly rational elites will search for information on better and worse domestic regimes and imitate those that appear better. Clearly elites are engaging in this kind of information search and imitation, not least in China itself. Since the days of Deng Xiaoping, China's leaders have admired and tried to emulate the authoritarian-capitalist city-state of Singapore. A spectacular economic success – its per capita GDP in 2014 was \$56,284, slightly higher than that of the United States and well above China's \$7,590<sup>6</sup> – Singapore also is an ideological powerhouse. Its late long-time leader Lee Kwan Yew propagated an ideology of “Asian values” that prizes societal harmony and productivity over democracy. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is doubtless popular, but fixes elections in its favor. The state controls most media outlets and the Sedition Act disallows expressions that “bring into hatred or contempt or ... excite disaffection against the Government” (Reyes 2015).

Ortmann and Thompson (2016, 39-40) write, “China remains obsessed with Singapore, which is the only country in the region to achieve advanced economic industrialization without undergoing substantial political liberalization. The key ‘lesson’ that China is trying to learn is how to combine authoritarian rule with ‘good governance’ (‘meritocratic’ one-party rule).” Today Xi Jinping's government encourages research on Singapore and Singapore welcomes the opportunity to share its wisdom (ibid., 41). But Singapore's defiance of Western theories of modernization has attracted many other admirers (Bailey

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<sup>6</sup> In current U.S. dollars. Source: World Bank, n.d.

2015). Officials in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand all have expressed admiration for the Singapore model and an intention to learn from it – the last stating, “Thailand should not aim to become a fully fledged democracy but rather an ‘authoritarian democracy’ like Singapore” (Panakorn 2012, 3).

Is China itself a model? In contrast that of the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), China’s current domestic regime has never been articulated by a clear positive ideology. The CCP monopolizes political power and is determined to continue doing so. But it began to relax its control of China’s economy in 1978, as Deng Xiaoping initiated the country’s famous experiment with market economics. Academics and journalists, Chinese and otherwise, have attempted to characterize and analyze China’s regime type as Market-Leninism (Kristoff 1993), authoritarian capitalism (Gat 2007), the “Beijing Consensus” (Halper 2013), or democratic meritocracy (Bell 2015). But the CCP’s preoccupation with Singapore suggests a lack confidence in its own regime; its domestic legitimacy on high rates of economic growth and nationalism.

By no means does non-democratic capitalism monopolize East Asia. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia are liberal democracies. Some elites in non-democratic states regard liberal democracy as the best available regime and dearly want to have it in their own countries. The region is home to thousands of human rights activists, one of whom, Aung San Suu Kyi, has recently become State Councilor (analogous to Prime Minister) in democratizing Burma. Activists cooperate with IGOs and NGOs from Western countries, including the Open Society Foundations, the U.S.-based International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute, the German-based Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.<sup>7</sup> Over the past decade Japan has stressed democracy promotion abroad, partly as an antidote to the rise of China (Ichihara 2014). Democracy promoters have local partners of activists and politicians, suggesting that liberal democracy has an extensive following in China’s neighborhood.

Overall, no elite consensus on the best regime exists in East and Southeast Asia, and it is not clear which regime type will ultimately be selected for. Evolutionary logic implies that the answer depends on the relative performance of the liberal democracies of the region and of the United States (an extra-regional hegemon), on the one hand, and of the single-party capitalist states such as Singapore and China itself, on the other. The latter point

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<sup>7</sup> See works cited, at end of this paper, for websites.

brings us to the question of how far China's leaders can be expected to work against the advance of democracy in the region.

### ***Niche Construction***

This paper has focused on intentional niche construction. It is clear that the CCP regards liberal democracy as a threat within China's own borders. In 2013 the CCP circulated Document No. 9, explicitly declaring that party officials must reject and combat various principles of liberal democracy as foreign and destabilizing (China File 2013). If CCP officials are familiar with Western IR literature, they may also know that a number of studies find that democratizing states tend to align with the United States (Starr and Siverson 1994; Haas 2005; Ratner 2009; Owen 2010; Bader 2014, 15-27). Because the spread of democracy is a threat to their regime, evolutionary logic suggests that the CCP's leaders should attempt to construct a niche to protect their regime by trying to block the spread of democracy. We already have noted that the Singapore-inspired model of authoritarian capitalism enjoys broad transnational appeal among elites, so we should expect the CCP to be helping partisans of that regime and to undermine liberal democrats.

Is the CCP doing so? The scholarly literature gives a mixed answer.<sup>8</sup> Clearly Beijing has used force to try to quash democracy in Hong Kong (Chen and Kinzelbach 2015). Outside its own borders, however, it is striking that any attempts by the CCP to contain liberal democracy are indirect or at least non-lethal. Beijing is far from carrying out the covert action that Washington carried out during the Cold War against leftists (including democrats) in Latin America and elsewhere, or even the more passive resistance to fascist and fascist-leaning actors in from 1936-43. Evolutionary logic would suggest that the CCP leadership is endeavoring to learn which modes of niche construction work and which do not; perhaps it has concluded that U.S.- and Soviet/Russian-style coercive modes are ultimately counter-productive. Ultimately, the CCP and the rest of us will learn whether this innovation of non-lethal niche construction works and is worth imitating.

As to non-lethal niche construction, Bader finds in a thorough empirical study that the Chinese government has aided authoritarian leaders in Burma, Cambodia, and Mongolia by targeting them with goods that they then redistribute to their constituencies (or

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<sup>8</sup> I set aside any indirect or unintended diffusion from China to its neighbors, such as in the intriguing observation of Benjamin Reilly that island states of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines) are more democratic than those of the mainland (Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia). Reilly attributes this finding to variation in the historical strength of Chinese influence, which in turn has been influenced by geography (Reilly 2015).



selectorates). In Burma, for example, Chinese state-owned enterprises have had lucrative contracts with Rangoon's military junta; the latter has built its capacity and implemented its preferred development strategy to perpetuate its own power (in effect, domestic niche construction). China has made no attempt to reach or empower the Burmese public. Bader concludes that China's leaders are attempting via non-lethal means to sustain authoritarianism in their region (Bader 2014, 66-85). Andrew Nathan writes that more generally Beijing "supplies investments, markets, arms, diplomatic backing, and other benefits that help [authoritarian regimes] survive (Nathan 2015, 165). Bader does note, however, that in dealing with democratic Mongolia, Beijing has worked not only with governing elites and the military but also with the public by, e.g., working with historians to influence Mongolian discourse about China (Nathan 2015, 86-98).<sup>9</sup> China's rulers also have worked with Burma's democratizing government and have cultivated relations with Aung San Suu Kyi (Blanchard 2016).

Less directly but still deliberately, Nathan notes, Beijing is trying to "shape international institutions to make them 'regime-type-neutral' instead of weighted in favor of democracy." One way that Western countries have promoted liberal democracy is by building international institutions that press countries to honor human rights; the CCP is trying to undermine this human rights bias. On the UN Human Rights Council, China's representatives have promoted "universality," which hampers the singling out of individual countries for violations, as well as rules that allow the state under review heavy influence over the review's agenda. Beijing has promoted norms of quiet, state-to-state complaints about human rights rather than the more effective public group complaints. It also has used its veto on the UN Security Council to slow or stop interventions on behalf of human rights. Concerning the Internet, Beijing opposed a U.S.-sponsored proposal for freedom of information, pushing instead (with Russia) for more state-based regulation (Nathan 2015, 164-67). Finally, the new China-dominated Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) attaches fewer conditions to loans than do the U.S.-dominated World Bank and IMF; it remains to be seen whether those differences will implicate the future of democratic reform in debtor states (Chow 2016).

As to (probably) unintentional niche construction, demonstration effects from China's economic successes were noted in the preceding section on selection and retention. In

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<sup>9</sup> Bader uses not evolutionary theory but the selectorate theory of Bueno de Mesquita et al., which predicts that governments of all hegemons, not just authoritarian ones, will prefer to deal with authoritarian states for the sake of efficiency and reliability. This theory would find anomalous any promotion of democracy, such as that done by the United States after the Second World War.

setting an example of non-democratic competitiveness, China's market-Leninism continues to cast doubt on liberalism's claim to be the best way to order society, and hence to inhibit the spread of democracy and perhaps to weaken its consolidation. Vietnam is sometimes held up as an imitator of China. The Vietnamese communist party, too, has a monopoly on political power and, under its *doi moi* reforms, allows market mechanisms influence over the distribution of resources. Dosch and Vuving (2008, 2) write, however, that Vietnam has copied Singapore and South Korea as well as China, and is different from China in significant ways.

## **Conclusion**

Evolutionary logic holds great promise for those who wish to understand and explain the varied fortunes of democracy and other regime types across the world and through history. International relations scholars who study diffusion, socialization, hegemony, and various other phenomena already often appeal to evolutionary mechanisms. Evolution, as applied to world politics, is not a tight deductive theory that offers precise predictions. It is rather a framework that pulls together a number of extant theses concerning the diffusion of regimes. Its logic points us to competition among states, and hence their rulers, for scarce resources, and also to transnational learning and imitation of evidently successful regime types and the fading away of unsuccessful ones. Recent developments in evolutionary thought point us also to the tendency of agents to construct niches to protect themselves, and note that those niches can skew evolution so as to favor the perpetuation of the niche constructor.

Evolutionary logic can help us understand China and the future of democracy in East Asia, and possibly globally, by pointing us to certain phenomena: efforts by elites to gather information and learn about which regimes work best, resulting processes of selection and retention of regimes, and attempts by the Chinese Communist Party to shape its domestic and international environment so that it will have an easier time retaining power. A full consideration would include unintentional niche construction by China, and also niche construction attempts in the region by powerful democracies, including the United States and Japan. Evolution in world politics is, unsurprisingly, political: it entails interest, power, and ideas. Rightly understood, evolution does not point to "progress," however, defined, or a universally valid regime type, be it liberal democracy or its alternatives. Rather, evolution alerts us both to pressures on elites to enact democratic reforms and to the potential of those elites to manipulate their environment so as to hold democracy at bay longer than we might imagine.

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