

---

---

# THE CHINESE MODEL OF DEMOCRACY AS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY'S MAJOR COMPETITOR

SYMPOSIUM DISCUSSION: REITZ

APRIL 14, 2018

DRAKE UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL

**David Stebenne:** Just a few thoughts for you to comment on. Do you see the recent decision to end term limits for the Chinese leader for the first time since the demise of Mao as threatening the progress of democracy in China? So that's one. Second, is the lack of a robust two-party competition at the national level—something we've had for a long time here, but they don't have there—something that really is democracy harming for them? And then the third question is to what extent the great big and growing military in China is a threat to the progress of democracy in China?

**John Reitz:** Good questions. First of all, I haven't had a chance to be over in China since they've ended term limits, but I'm confident that my various friends in China, who are really avowed Democrats, are very disappointed by this. It's a big step backwards. China was kind of moving toward an ideal of collective leadership. And that collective leadership was expressed most clearly in the nine person Politburo of the Communist Party which sits at the very top of the party. And it was originally nine people. It has been for a long time nine people, and that meant that different factions within the Communist Party were represented on that body. One of the first things Xi Jinping did was reduce the number to seven. And he also made sure that basically he got rid of anyone who wasn't someone who was really in his camp. So that whole idea of kind of a nascent separation of powers or at least a diffusion of power within a small group of governors has really been set back. That is the only thing that I would observe and that may be the end of the dream of those in China who would say they're really moving toward liberal democracy. I wouldn't even say that. I would say that the Chinese model has existed for so long. I'm really treating the current model of government as simply an extension of the dynastic model. And if you think about that 2000 years of not completely stable rule, China has a tumultuous history like all countries, but they have had that core governing system for a long time and sometimes the emperor was in complete control. Sometimes it was a real one person autocracy. Maybe Xi Jinping

will be able to; in many ways Xi Jinping is the modern Chinese emperor. But there's also been lots of periods where there was kind of collective governance by a top group of administrators. They could move back and forth. I don't know that it's unstable. The lack of robust two-party competition is the only thing that clearly shows how far they are from the liberal democratic model. I think there's a lot of competition within the party. There are clearly at least two wings to the party. There's the party wing that is very concerned about the disparity of income in the country today and the quest, kind of the desire, to go back to a more iron, rice-bowl kind of approach true Communist idea, I guess. And there are those who see the Party as—really that what they are doing and what they should do as—reinventing themselves as managers of a modern industrial and postindustrial society. So their main thing is to allow some people to get rich because that will empower their economics. The military is an interesting point. China as the Communists have always had the view that the Communist civil leaders have to be in charge of the military, and they have been. Xi Jinping is the head of the military as well as the head of the Communist party and the President. So I don't see that as a big problem. I don't think there's a big likelihood that the military would seize power the way it does in many countries.

**Elizabeth Foley:** I'm just curious. You suggest that China is our chief competitor in the world for ideological purposes. And I think that's generally true, but I was intrigued by the way you described their brand of Communism as being sort of culturally rooted in Confucism. And that just makes me wonder how much of a competitor they really can be, in the sense, as it's not really going to be exportable to countries that don't have that culture.

**Reitz:** Thank you for that question. Because it's a point I meant to make. Yeah, China, first of all generally speaking, does not try to export its culture. Historically they've always taken the view that the rest of the world doesn't really deserve Chinese culture. Or at least they're not concerned about it. That it's up to them whether they want it. More recently, the only reason I say this is that I did come across some modern writing that suggested that this is a model ready for export. And I completely agree with your comment. This is so rooted in Chinese culture that I can't imagine it really working anywhere else, but what it will do: it will give a lot of govern to and inspiration to more garden-variety authoritarians around the world. I think that's the danger.