

**Democracy Is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China.** By Yu Keping. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009. 240 pages. \$34.95. **Reviewed by Dr. Larry M. Wortzel**, who served two tours of duty as a military attaché in China and is former Director of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

Yu Keping is deputy director of the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and a professor of politics at Beijing University. He has written more than 80 articles and four books in the last decade. *Democracy is a Good Thing* takes its name from a lead essay by Yu that was published in *Beijing Daily*, the Communist Party-controlled newspaper, in 2006. The collection of essays is an excellent introduction to the way that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is responding to calls for a more open political system in China, and a good introduction to how CCP theorists approach what they call democratic reforms.

The Brookings Institution published this book as the initial volume in a series designed to translate into English the works of some of China's "most original thinkers" in the areas of political, economic, and legal affairs. The publisher's objective is to "help those in the English-speaking community of China studies understand some of the dynamic new thinking" in China regarding reform and democracy.

The introduction to the book is by Cheng Li of the Brookings Institution, who has excellent access to political theorists in China and a deep understanding of Chinese domestic politics. Reading his introduction is a must before tackling the nuanced Marxist-Leninist theory of Yu Keping. Cheng Li makes it clear there are incentives Chinese leaders seek in pursuing political reform, such as maintaining Communist Party power, and that there are obstacles to reform inside the CCP that would threaten the Chinese Communist Party's rule.

Truthfully, however, the reader needs a lexicon of Marxist-Leninist terminology to read the book. Yu Keping is not speaking of democracy as most Americans understand the term. For American democracy evokes Jeffersonian ideals of representative government where individuals and states have rights, limitations on the power of government imposed by citizens, and competing political parties. China, on the other hand, is a "people's democratic dictatorship" that follows a system of "democratic centralism" according to the CCP constitution. *PL Magazine*, published by the Progressive Labor Party, the reorganized Communist Party of the United States, explains democratic centralism as a [communist] party divided into cells that make suggestions regarding how to improve it and evaluate party positions to make suggestions for change. This approach conforms to the way that Yu Keping describes "intra-party democracy," which he advocates. Thus the reader has to be careful to distinguish between his or her understanding of the term "democracy," in the American or western European sense, and Yu's meaning. Yu is describing keeping channels of communication inside the CCP open for suggestions but is not ready to extend democratic reforms or rights to China's population.

If the reader had any doubt about how the CCP treats reform-minded political theorists, consider the 11-year jail sentence handed out in December 2009 to Liu Xiaobo by a Chinese court for "inciting subversion of state power." He is one of the authors of *Charter 08*, a 2008 document signed by some 300 Chinese thinkers calling for a military, police establishment, and security and intelligence apparatus responsive to the Chinese state, not to the Chinese Communist Party. After *Charter 08*'s publication, Liu was arrested on suspicion of seeking to subvert the state.

Yu Keping is an accomplished Marxist-Leninist theorist who has overseen the translation of many western political works into Chinese. He has worked with some of the foremost socialist and Marxist theorists in Eastern Europe. Yu believes that there should be an incremental process of democratic development in China that starts with intra-party democracy, i.e., a greater chance for CCP members to express themselves inside the party. He seeks more than anything stability for the nation and the party.

Keep in mind that the government and the Communist Party are one in China. Liu Xiaobo went to jail for suggesting they should be separate. In discussing “civil society organizations,” Yu provides a taxonomy of the types of organizations that might exist in a society. He counsels caution in encouraging such organizations to develop, since “some [in China] view civic organizations as dissident forces that resist or oppose the government.” Yu notes the role of civil society organizations in the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe, which led to the end of Communist Party power there. Ultimately, he counsels the need for government approval and oversight to “prevent CSOs [civil society organizations] from becoming adversaries of the government.”

*Democracy Is a Good Thing* is an excellent book. The Brookings Institution has succeeded in introducing a nuanced, Marxist-Leninist political theorist in China to readers without ideological polemics. The reader should avoid, however, “mirror-imaging” the Jeffersonian concept when a Communist Party theorist discusses democracy. Those who follow domestic politics in China should read this book and the subsequent volumes on legal theory and economics. The theories have application for reforms that may follow in such countries as Vietnam, Cuba, and Laos.