“Democracy Is a Good Thing, But…”
Tun-jen Cheng
College of William and Mary

Ed Friedman is right in saying that democracy is such a good sounding word that China has understandably been trying to claim some ownership of this concept. One assiduous effort for such concept ownership can be found in a recent debate triggered by the publication of Yu Keping’s unusually popular essay entitled “Democracy Is a Good Thing.” My brief presentation focuses on Yu Keping’s views and writings on democracy and democratic reform.

In the early winter of 2006, when the Chinese political elites were engrossed in viewing the CCTV series on the rise of great powers (da-guo-jue-qí), Beijing Daily uncharacteristically featured an aphoristic article by Yu Keping on “Democracy Is a Good Thing”. Creating a big splash among intellectual, academic, and perhaps policy circles in China, his “Democracy Is a Good Thing” essay—now probably as renowned in China as Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?”—raises a glimmer of hope that a path to democratic change has been found, and that the debate on political reform can now be concluded. So much attention has been drawn to this high-profile essay that the Brookings’ Thornton China Center set forth to collect Yu Keping’s writings into a book that inaugurates its Chinese Thinkers series.¹

Yu Keping’s writings and comments have been meticulously combed in the past few years, probably for a couple of reasons. First, as a Beida PhD and a leading figure in the party state’s brain trust, Yu may provide a clue to democratic reform that China under Hu’s reign might be contemplating. The 16th Party Congress in 2002 highlighted intraparty democracy. The 17th Party Congress in 2007 underscored “people’s democracy,” a notion that seems to be “bigger” and more promising than intraparty democracy in terms of its scope. The train of thought in Yu’s writings may help us to decode the lofty but often vague concepts and projects that the party state claimed to have embraced. Yu is situated at the intersection of epistemic and policy communities, so his writings may well be a gold mine for what James Scott would call “hidden script.”

Second, as a counterpoint to Pan Wei’s view and the like of others who have espoused legal reform and/or economic development at the expense of democratic reform, Yu’s insistence on the necessity for China to continue democratic reform put a brake on the newly reignited drive toward political neo-conservatism. In his most recent commentary printed in China’s Business Week, September 7, 2009, Yu blatantly repudiated Pan Wei’s view and contended that democracy and legality are twins. In this interview, he also castigated a popular view that the enhancement of quality of life takes precedence over the pursuit of democracy, and instead asserted that people’s livelihood and democracy are the two wings of a soaring People’s Republic.² Democracy is not just a good sounding word, a manifestation of modernity, and a

² “Minzu he minsheng si ren-min gongheguo teng-fei de nian-yi” [Democracy and People’s Livelihood are the two wings of a soaring people’s republic,” a journalist’s interview with Yu Keping, Zhong-guo shan-yeh zhou-kan [China’s Business Week], September 7, 2009.
universal value; it is essential to preventing dictatorship (the negative results of which were so painfully felt by the Chinese people during the GLF and the GPCR) and to foster further economic development. Yu's advocacy for democracy has a very strong Churchill bent: democracy is not perfect and cannot be expected to solve all problems, but it is unquestionably better than non-democracy.

So how does Yu conceptualize democracy and how does he prescribe democratic reform? Yu’s ontological view of democracy can be summed up in four propositions: “officials must be elected by the citizens;” “officials’ powers can be curtailed by the citizens;” “democracy guarantees human rights;” and “power must be balanced and checked.” Adding up these four elements, we might indeed imagine a framework of competitive, multiparty, liberal democracy with a Montesquieu-like, tripartite power-balancing system. Yu is not averse to this system that has been practiced in Western developed countries, but he readily admits that the Chinese Communist Party has refused to adopt such a system in the foreseeable feature. Therefore, what can be done now is to find an institutional expression of democratic ideals that is going to be politically feasible and palatable to the CCP. If the CCP party state, to date, is not willing to entertain nationwide multiparty competition, or turn the National People's Congress and People’s Political Consultative Council into two chambers of a national legislature, or let go of its control over the judiciary, then at present, intraparty democracy and grass-roots democracy must be vigorously promoted, and some innovative checks and balances must be crafted. After all, Yu contends, the democratic idea is good and universal, but the form or institutional configuration should not be standardized. China can and should learn from the West, but also should bear in mind its national condition (guo-qing). Checks and balances, for example, can be instituted not among three branches of the government, but among personnel, administrative and financial authorities, or among the party, the media, and civil social organizations, or even among groups within the party.

It is over the question of what is to be done that readers are puzzled. On the one hand, Yu contends, that democratic enhancement in China should be a bottom-up process, and an inside-out process, implying that grass-roots democracy and intra-party democracy are only a prelude to something big in the future (perhaps including even a full-blown national competitive multiparty election). On the other hand, he holds that political power can be held accountable if “the interests and capabilities of the people, the party and the media” can be leveraged to oversee the exercise of power. Hence, grass-roots democracy, intraparty competition, the media’s oversight (on which he never has elaborated), and the involvement of civil society organizations (which he has meticulously catalogued and analyzed) in policy deliberation, making, and implementation might well be a substitute for a national, competitive, multiparty, liberal democratic system.

Thus, Yu seems to be equivocating and hedging. He emphatically states that democratic reform is an incremental process. Grass-roots elections are only a start, and direct election can certainly be practiced beyond the village level. Indeed, Premier Wen has envisioned direction elections at the township, county, and provincial levels, without suggesting any time table for the expansion. Inter-group competition within a single party, as Giovanni Sartori has argued, can never be a functional equivalent of interparty competition. Indeed, as Yu knows all too well, intraparty competitive democracy is easier said than practiced, given the long tradition of not legitimating the formation of two competing views and leadership groups (i-ge zheng-dang,
lian-ge he-sin). Other players in the mechanism of checks and balances, especially, the media and the CSOs, will have to be empowered to monitor and restrain state power and to help prepare the people to exercise their rights vis-à-vis the party state.

However, while Yu argues that democratic reform is an incremental process that presumably can lead to something big, he also specifies other cardinal principles of change. Democracy is a good thing, but democracy should not be too costly, otherwise it will be rejected by elites of the party state who have vested interests. Democracy is a good thing, but it should not be destabilizing, that is, democratic reform should follow a script acceptable to most players, and not result in the dislodging of the CCP from power. Democracy is a good thing, but it should adapt to national conditions.

To conclude, Yu has categorically affirmed that democracy is a good thing, and is something that China should have, but also he has invented four cardinal principles for democratic reform: (1) it should be incremental, (2) it should not be costly, (3) it should not be destabilizing, and (4) it should be in line with national conditions. Dr Yu Keiping is quintessentially a thinker in the realm of what is feasible, rather than what is desirable. He is ideologically removed from Pan Wei and other neo-conservatives, but he is also quite far apart from political liberals, such as the late Lee Shengzhi and perhaps the late premier Zhao Ziyang. As shown in his newly published memoir, Zhao was probably the only PRC leader and thinker who explicitly urged the PRC to adopt parliamentary democracy and to learn from newly democratized polities such as South Korea and Taiwan. To quote from his book, Prisoner of the State, “the newly emerging nations with their fast-paced development have…converge[d] on a parliamentary democratic system…Taiwan and South Korea…have had positive experiences that we would benefit from studying.” By the way throughout his writings, Yu never has made reference to democracy in South Korea and Taiwan.