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Journal of Democracy, Volume 14, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 27-35 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2003.0005>



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China's Changing of the Guard

THREATS TO PARTY SUPREMACY

Bruce J. Dickson

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With the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) having emerged from its Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002 with a new leadership and an updated program, what is the outlook for the political system that it controls?

The ease with which the recent turnover of power was handled bespeaks an unprecedented degree of institutional stability within China's political elite. And yet the CCP has for some time now been watching its grassroots organizational strength ebb away, the victim of a number of stresses that have been generated by the Party's progressive integration with a rapidly changing society. The CCP's policies of "reform and opening" have meanwhile had unintended consequences that have further weakened the prospects for its continued political monopoly: Due to an expanding private sector, the Party no longer controls where people live and work; due to the spread of internet access, satellite television, and alternative media, it no longer controls what information people have or how it is disseminated; and due to a combination of larger disposable incomes and political liberalization, it no longer controls what people do with their spare time. To manage these consequences, the Party has adopted a new strategy of control. As necessary as this strategy has been, it has effectively reoriented the Party relative to Chinese society, and in a way that raises a question of long-term survival common to many a liberalizing authoritarian regime dominated by a single party: Will adapting to a new economic and social environment strengthen or actually weaken the Party's hold on power?

Many observers, both within China and beyond, expect that continued economic reform, privatization, and integration into the international system will lead to economic developments that will in turn spur forms of social development—specifically, the rise of civil society and, ultimately, the onset of democratization. This is a seductive view, one based on the often-reviled but still popular insights of modernization theory. In truth, however, democracy is far from a “natural” response to economic and social development: While related to these levels of development, it is also a distinctively political process driven by distinctively political actors (both within and beyond the regime). The CCP knows this, and it is taking steps to prevent organized demands for political change from emerging outside the Party.

The CCP’s strategy has been two-pronged: to forge corporatist links and, at the same time, coopt economic and technical elites.¹ Beginning in the 1980s, China saw the formation of a myriad of economic, social, and professional organizations. Party or government officials have since dominated the top posts of many of these organizations, allowing the state at once to abandon its “totalitarian” aspirations and maintain a decisive measure of control over the most influential groups in society.² For this reason, very few of these organizations are even close to enjoying the degree of autonomy that normative models of “civil society” demand. But neither do they seek that degree of autonomy, because in China autonomy is akin to impotence. They prefer instead to be embedded within the state, as similar organizations in most East Asian countries and most developing nations also prefer.³

Meanwhile, the Party has been recruiting the kind of economic and technical expertise needed to promote economic modernization. The rationale here is itself two-fold: First, the CCP wants to be connected with the types of people it needs to achieve continued growth, which is a main source of the Party’s contemporary claim to legitimate rule. Second, the CCP wants to preempt efforts by these new elites either to form their own groups in opposition to the Party, or to align with other regime opponents. Cooptation of this kind is not the CCP’s traditional manner of party-building, which was to target common folks—mainly laborers and farmers—and to do so by creating cells where they live and work. But the Party is now devoting more and more emphasis to those with developed entrepreneurial and technical skills: Whereas approximately 5 percent of the general population belongs to the Party, the proportion of Party members among private entrepreneurs rose from 13 percent in 1993 to around 20 percent in 2000. By contrast, industrial and agricultural workers now constitute a minority of the membership, dropping from 63 percent in 1994 to 45 percent in 2002. The Party has also made a priority of attracting educated expertise. The ratio of members with a high-school or higher level of education rose from 17.8 percent in 1984 to 52.5 percent in 2002. And within the CCP’s Central

Committee, the percentage of members holding college degrees rose from 55.5 in 1982 to 98.6 in 2002, while the proportion of those with technocratic backgrounds (that is, science, engineering, or management) rose from just 2 percent in 1982 to 51 percent in 1997. All nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee selected in November 2002 are technocrats.

As a result of these shifts, the CCP has redefined its relationship with Chinese society—a redefinition expressed in its “Three Represents” slogan: Instead of portraying itself simply as the vanguard of the proletariat, the Party now claims to represent 1) society’s “advanced productive forces,” meaning especially the growing urban middle class of businesspeople, professionals, and high-tech specialists; 2) the promotion of “advanced culture,” as opposed to either “feudal” traditions or modern materialism; and 3) the interests of the majority of the Chinese people. It is this reorientation of the Party, more than any institutionalized arrangements for succession at its top, that creates the real potential for political change.

To Ban or Not to Ban?

Both strategies are risky: On one hand, new organizations may develop identities of their own and reject Party leadership; on the other, new members may push the Party in directions anathema to its orthodox constituents. And indeed, these very concerns generated rancorous intra-CCP debate during the past decade, particularly over the membership of entrepreneurs. In August 1989—not long (nor coincidentally) after the regime had forcibly suppressed that year’s popular prodemocracy demonstrations in Beijing and hundreds of other Chinese cities—the CCP’s orthodox leaders secured a ban on the recruitment of entrepreneurs. This slowed the latter’s proliferation within the Party but came far from stopping it: Local Party officials often ignored the ban, while existing Party members undermined it by entering more and more into private business themselves.

The ban’s propriety was deliberated in the CCP’s own journals throughout the 1990s. Those in favor noted the contradiction between the Party’s changing demographics and its socialistic tradition of supporting the interests of labor and the peasantry specifically over and against those of private capital, warning that the growing number of entrepreneurs in the Party was undermining its cohesion and even threatening its survival. Those opposed to the ban made a more pragmatic argument. The new entrepreneurs were succeeding, they claimed, on account of the Party’s own policies and should not be punished for doing so; moreover, their success benefited the party and the nation by creating new jobs and increasing general prosperity, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the regime; and finally, if the entrepreneurs continued

to be excluded from the Party then they would be likely to organize against it, because their growing economic resources would inevitably convert into political clout.

On 1 July 2001, the eightieth anniversary of the CCP's founding, Party general secretary Jiang Zemin officially urged lifting the ban—but even that failed to resolve the issue. Publications taking an orthodox Marxist line harshly criticized Jiang's recommendation as inimical to the CCP's interests, going so far as to charge him with violating Party discipline by proposing such a dramatic initiative without the proper intra-Party vetting. In response, Jiang shut these periodicals down, thereby silencing the Party's public voice of orthodox Marxism. His proposal to recruit entrepreneurs and his doctrine of the "Three Represents" were added to the Party's Constitution at the November 2002 Congress, but the debate continues behind the scenes. Opponents of adaptation persist in arguing that the Chinese economy's new tack is transforming Chinese society and threatening to create political pressure of a type and a magnitude that will bring the Party's rule to an end. Supporters respond that embracing a new definition of the Party's role and opening its ranks to contemporary China's diverse economic interests (many representatives of which had been persecuted as class enemies in the past) will bolster, rather than undermine, its right to rule.

The decay of grassroots Party organizations has meanwhile been stark. Whereas the Party was ubiquitous in the workplaces of the old planned economy, it is virtually absent from those of the growing private sector. The CCP has branches in less than 1 percent of the more than 1.5 million private enterprises that have emerged in the country, and it has recruited few new members from their workforces. In the countryside, where 70 percent of China's 1.3 billion people still live, the Party declared half of its rural organizations inactive by the mid-1990s, when the recruitment of new members had become rare. Despite the Party's efforts to reinvigorate its rural branches, reports of endemically weak organization and low recruitment continued to circulate. An estimated 2.5 million Party members, mostly young men, joined the "floating population" of migrants looking for work in the cities, further weakening the Party's presence in rural areas. Concomitantly, clans and organized-crime groups have become dominant in these areas, sometimes in collaboration with local Party and government officials. Given that the capacity to monitor and sanction economic and social behavior is a definitive element of a Leninist system, such capacity is essential to that system's stability.⁴ As Samuel Huntington has noted, the strength of any one-party authoritarian regime depends largely on the strength of the ruling party: As it weakens, the regime destabilizes.⁵

The CCP's twin strategies of corporatism and cooptation are broadly analogous to the *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* elements of state corporatism identified by Alfred Stepan: The CCP wants to include technological

and economic elites that do not threaten it with an alternative political agenda, while continuing to exclude those who do; the Party wants to include the segments of an emerging civil society whose interests are largely economic, and who are likely to cooperate with the state, while excluding and occasionally repressing politically contentious elements that are more likely to pose a challenge to the CCP, such as the China Democratic Party or the high-profile quasi-religious group, Falun Gong. As Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards have noted, just as a vibrant civil society is essential to stable democracies, it tends to constitute a grave danger to authoritarian regimes.⁶ The CCP is well aware of the difference between the economic realm within China's civil society, a realm whose interests are compatible with the Party's, and the smaller but more dangerous political realm, which poses a potential challenge.⁷ The CCP's strategy is designed to embrace the economic realm, suppress the political realm, and prevent the defection of the economic and technical elites to the opposition. It is gambling that this strategy is viable for the long-run, but as Ken Jowitt has warned, the period of inclusion may simply precede, rather than prevent, the extinction of Leninist parties.⁸

What Is at Stake?

China's leaders are consumed by threats to the stability of their system. Its fragility may not be easy to see, because the CCP has not faced a direct challenge since 1989, when it managed to survive only at a tremendous cost to its prestige within China and to its reputation abroad. Since then, protesters have been careful to remain loosely organized and unallied, and to avoid questioning the fundamental legitimacy of the political system. But despite these cautions, there has been a significant rise in protestation throughout the country in both urban and rural areas.⁹ Most of these incidents have been over bread-and-butter issues: unpaid wages, severance packages, the confiscation of property, illegal taxes, promissory notes in lieu of cash payment for contracted grain and other foodstuffs, and so on. The CCP has responded with a combination of carrots and sticks, meeting the monetary demands of protesters while imprisoning their leaders.

The Party has consistently and sometimes ruthlessly defended its monopoly on political association. Even a movement as innocuous as one encouraging college students to protect the environment by not using disposable chopsticks has been careful not to organize itself, lest it be seen as a potential opposition group and its leaders risk expulsion from school or even imprisonment. The absence of large-scale protests after a decade of remarkable examples—from the Democracy Wall of 1978–79 to the popular Tiananmen Square protests of 1989—is not plausibly attributable to a satisfied population but to a “rational” response

to a regime that has shown just how coldblooded it is in its willingness and ability to repress demands for greater political change.¹⁰ Although the regime has tried to base its legitimacy on economic development, the accompanying rise in corruption and inequality has ironically eroded that legitimacy at the same time. But the weakening of popular support for the Party does not by itself threaten its rule. As Adam Przeworski has argued, the attention paid to the “legitimacy” of a regime is often misplaced: What is more important is the absence of a viable alternative.¹¹ And the CCP has been successful in preventing the emergence of such an alternative. It is willing to accept the growing number of isolated protests, so long as they do not unite or organize into a more sustained social interest group. This has allowed the Party to remain resilient while minimizing the need to adapt politically. But it also means that there is no coherent, autonomous social force with which the CCP could negotiate during a crisis, rendering either a peaceful resolution or a “pacted” transition exceedingly difficult.

What are the political implications of continued economic and social change in China? Throughout the post-Mao era, many observers have noted the incongruity of Leninist political institutions and a growing market economy, anticipating that at some point the political and economic systems would be brought into basic harmony, presumably through democratic reform rather than the revival of central planning. The CCP has so far stymied those expectations and the incongruity remains. Many observers continue nevertheless to envision the transformation of China into an economic powerhouse with vast commercial potential, which will eventually bring about a relatively smooth democratic transition.¹² But not everyone is so sanguine. China’s looming financial and economic crises have led some to predict a collapse of the Communist government, even if none among them pretend to foresee either when such a collapse would occur or what would be likely to come after it.¹³

Both perspectives miss important aspects of the picture. Those who believe that China’s political transformation will inevitably follow its economic modernization ignore the question of agency—that is, of who will lead the transformation and what shape they will give it: In an authoritarian context, democratization is not the inevitable result of economic growth but rather the consequence of actions by political leaders within the regime and democratic forces in the society at large. Most of China’s private entrepreneurs and technical elites have shown little interest in promoting democratization. The country’s dissident community has been effectively decimated by the imprisonment or exile of many of its most prominent leaders, while mistrust and personal conflicts among them—especially among those in exile—hamper effective coordination or the propagation of a unified message. Given this set of circumstances, it would be difficult to specify any likely agent of democratic political change. On the other hand, those who anticipate the

collapse of the Communist regime ignore the political resources available to the Party: It has successfully defended its monopoly on political organization, meaning the continued absence of any organized opposition and the continued acceptance of the CCP by most Chinese as the only game in town. At the same time, the Party remains a primary source of patronage for jobs and business opportunities. It has also wrapped itself in the Chinese flag amid rising nationalist sentiment, making criticism of it seem almost unpatriotic. Moreover, it has dampened popular support for political change by stoking fears of the instability that might accompany democratization. And many in China accept the CCP's claim that liberal democracy is incompatible with Chinese culture, further reducing pressure on the Party to undertake more extensive political reform.

Muddling Through

Under these conditions, the most likely scenario in the foreseeable future is for the CCP to muddle through with its strategy of limited adaptation, incorporating new interests while continuing to resist pressure for more ambitious political change. This is not only the most likely scenario; it is also the CCP's *best-case* scenario, because the economic and social changes underway are more apt to undermine its status as ruling party than strengthen it. The probability is that continued economic growth and privatization will weaken the Party through the continued decay of its grassroots organizations and the continued weakening of its ability to monitor and control prevailing social trends.

While China has experienced more political reform than most observers acknowledge,¹⁴ the design of this reform has been to make the authoritarian system work more effectively, not to make it more responsive to societal pressures for change. At the same time, it is undeniable that these pressures are rising. The question is whether the CCP can accommodate them within its essentially Leninist framework. And given both the CCP's history and the experience of other Leninist parties, the answer is likely to be no. First of all, Leninism is incompatible with the emergence of a genuine civil society, the principal aspiration of the former being to accentuate vertical lines of authority and prevent the kinds of horizontal ties and autonomous organizations that mark the latter. Second, China lacks institutions capable of channeling more demanding political participation. Precisely because the CCP has been so effective at protecting its political monopoly and repressing truly autonomous organizations, mass protest has a tendency to escalate out of control when it does happen. In every instance in which the CCP indicated it was considering or encouraging political reform, events quickly snowballed until Party leaders felt compelled forcibly to suppress the particular popular movements pressuring for reform. This was true during

the Democracy Wall movement in 1978–79, the experiments with local elections in the early 1980s, the student demonstrations in 1986–87, and again during 1989’s demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere. Today, despite the de facto liberalization that has been taking place, China’s leaders are reluctant to discuss openly the possibility of officially sponsored political reform for fear that they would open the floodgates again.

So the CCP is constrained by its own past actions, and in particular by its decisions to repress organized political protest and prevent the formation of autonomous organizations. Party leaders know this, and their carefully orchestrated succession arrangements and strategies of limited corporatism and cooptation are designed to dampen hopes that any substantial political reform is imminent. A number of authoritarian leaders in other settings have overestimated their popular support and so have overconfidently engaged in democratic reform on the belief that they would survive and prosper.¹⁵ But the CCP’s leadership is unlikely to make such a tactical error.

Accordingly, the prospects for democracy in China are related directly to the fate of the CCP itself. China is unlikely to experience democratization along with regime continuity, as did Taiwan and Mexico.¹⁶ That is, even though the CCP might survive a transition in some form, and even though many Party officials might remain active in a postcommunist regime—as has been the case with many governments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—if the country does become democratic, it will be essentially at the expense of the CCP. Nor would the decline of the CCP alone set the course of any postcommunist future for China. “Illiberal democracy” is common in Asia, and fully consolidated democracy is hardly the norm in the rest of the postcommunist world.¹⁷ As we have seen in all too many cases, the end of communism does not guarantee the beginning of democracy.

NOTES

1. See Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 88–120. See also my *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

2. See Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Minxin Pei, “Chinese Civic Associations: An Empirical Analysis,” *Modern China* 24 (July 1998): 285–318; Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China,” *China Quarterly* (March 2000): 124–41.

3. See Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

4. Andrew G. Walder, “The Decline of Communist Power: Elements of a Theory of Institutional Change,” *Theory and Society* 23 (April 1994): 297–323.

5. Samuel P. Huntington, "Social and Institutional Dynamics of One-Party Systems," in Samuel P. Huntington and Clement H. Moore, eds., *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society: The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 9.
6. Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996): 38–52.
7. Yanqi Tong, "State, Society, and Political Change in China and Hungary," *Comparative Politics* 26 (April 1994): 333–53; White, Howell, and Shang, *In Search of Civil Society*.
8. Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder*.
9. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
10. Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44 (October 1991): 7–48.
11. Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Transition to Democracy," in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, Vol. 3: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
12. Henry S. Rowen, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," *National Interest* (Fall 1996): 61–70; Shaohua Hu, *Explaining Chinese Democratization* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000); David Sheff, *China Dawn: The Story of a Technology and Business Revolution* (New York: Harper Business, 2002).
13. Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).
14. For an elaboration on these points, see Minxin Pei, "Is China Democratizing?" *Foreign Affairs* 77 (January–February 1998): 68–82. Pei is less optimistic in a subsequent look at the prospects for political reform in China; see "China's Governance Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (September–October 2002): 96–109.
15. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), especially ch. 6; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 174–78.
16. I elaborate on this argument in *Democratization in China and Taiwan: The Adaptability of Leninist Parties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and "Taiwan's Democratization: What Lessons for China?" in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Taiwan's Presidential Politics: Democratization and Cross-Strait Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).
17. Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Post-Communist World," *World Politics* 54 (January 2002): 212–44.