Introduction

Popular protest and state legitimation in 21st-century China

Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen

After a quarter century of "reform and opening," early 21st-century China appears to differ from Mao's China not merely in degree, but also in kind. Having outgrown the planned economy, Deng Xiaoping's decentralization of economic authority and broad embrace of the market mechanism has paid off: China's economy has grown at or near double-digit rates for most of the past two decades. China is now third, behind only the United States and Japan, in the overall size of its economy, and will soon surpass Japan and move into second place. Contrary to the expectations of many analysts who witnessed the massive street demonstrations of Beijing Spring and the brutal military crackdown of 4 June 1989, the Chinese Party-state has not only survived, but seemingly prospered.

But economic growth has been uneven, benefiting cities over the countryside and coastal areas over the hinterland. The growth of inequality has been both rapid and startling. According to a Chinese press report, in 2001 80 per cent of China's wealth was in the hands of less than 20 per cent of the population. Moreover, of the fifty richest Chinese as designated by Forbes, only four paid personal income taxes. Not surprisingly, a survey conducted by China's People's University found that only 5.2 per cent of the public felt that China's rich had gotten their wealth through proper means. Party cadres in the countryside live in multi-storey brick houses while peasants live in shacks. Rural migrants work as virtual slaves in urban factory compounds with no job security and none of the welfare benefits that were formerly the pride of the state sector. Free unions are outlawed, and workplace conditions are questionable. In the first six months of 2002, over 53,000 Chinese workers were killed in workplace accidents. Capitalist exploitation in China today arguably rivals the days of the Robber Barons in the US a century ago.

As a result, a baffling array of disorderly social protests has appeared. In the countryside, corrupt village elections have sparked peasant ire—some protests even taking their complaints all the way to Beijing. Tax pressures are also on the rise in rural China, as peasants suffer from the "snowball effect" of rising national taxes and inflation on the one hand, and local levies and cadre extortion on the other. Beijing has responded to such
emergence of new "civil society" and "public sphere" approaches to Chinese politics. New public spaces like private bookstores and cafes came under intense scrutiny. Was China witnessing the emergence of democracy in the West? Elizabeth Perry has argued that this new approach propounded Western research on Chinese politics out of the grasp of the earlier totalitarian view. What is clear, however, is that the CCP's new approach has significantly advanced our understanding of China. Some of the key assumptions from the earlier Oriental despotism and totalitarian
paradigms persist. Many state-society writings continue to take the form of

top-down "strong state, weak society" arguments. Moreover, in the after-

math of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, and the 1989

military crackdown in Tiananmen Square, Beijing has become — in the eyes

of many Americans inside and outside the scholarly community — the last

major bastion of Communist Tyranny against which to depict America as

the Land of the Free. Indeed, the 1989 image of a solitary Chinese man

blocking an advancing PLA tank in Tiananmen Square has revitalized this

"state dominates society" view of Chinese politics. As Richard Madsen has

noted, Americans continue to construe their "Liberal Myth" in opposition to

perceived Chinese tyranny.

These past approaches to Chinese state-society relations — Oriental

despotism, totalitarianism, civil society/public sphere — showed two

problems. First and foremost, each suffered from a Liberal bias that failed

to tell us more about ourselves than they did about China. China

largely served as a mirror within which we cast our own, rather than a

treasure about ourselves or our liberty. Secondly, these approaches were largely

procurerst, foisting Western categories and concepts onto Chinese

realities. Like the mythical Greek monster Procrustes, who made his captives fit his

bed — whether that required stretching or cutting off their limbs — Western

scholars frequently took theories derived from the Euro-American

experience and forced China to fit them. In the recent heated debate over

whether or not a civil society/public sphere exists in China, for instance,

both sides largely assumed that for China to successfully democratize, there

must be a Western-style autonomous space for public political activity.

Optimists would imagine a Starbucks in Shanghai, find two intellectuals

having a conversation, and proclaim, "Eureka! They're following our road to

democracy!" Skeptics, by contrast, would lament: "They're discussing the

best way to make money in China's new economy — not politics. China

will never democratize." Notably, both sides of this civil society debate often

shared the assumption that political change in China must resemble that

experienced in the West, discounting the possibility that China may take a

very different route to political development.

The reform period that officially began with the decisions of the 3rd

Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 set China on a

new path to development, and economic modernisation made the central

task. However, it was only in the aftermath of the events of 1989 and the

Party-state's recognition that its previous sources of legitimacy — based

upon both moral and economic performance — had been effectively shattered

that a new relationship between state and society began to be forged. While

continuities persist, the Party-state has in important ways created both a

new society and a new style of politics.

Building upon recent scholarship, this volume seeks to re-conceptualize

the dynamics of early 21st-century Chinese politics. If we are to under-

stand state-society relations in China, we will need to be careful about using

Western concepts and deductive theories to understand Chinese realities. We

discuss the inductive, bottom-up interrogation of political contention

in China.

What does it mean to speak of "the" Chinese state? The Communist

Party, for instance, is frequently anthropomorphized (made human) as a

unitary actor capable of strategic choice and coordinated behavior. Does

such a monolith exist in China today? We argue that it does not. As Deng

Xiaoping decentralized the structures of Chinese governance in the 1980s

and 1990s, he was seeking to strengthen the Party — not to democratize it.

As a result, however, the number of Party and state actors involved in

political contention has proliferated rapidly. Local Party and state actors

are not the passive puppets of higher-ups. As Kevin O'Brien relates in his

chapter (Chapter 5), "when I was traveling with a Minzu autonomous

province and being introduced to a Fujian village, we encountered a village
cadre who refused to release some election results. The Ministry official said:
'I'm your bosses' bosses' boss's boss, so turn over the results.' And the lonely

village head responded: 'Because you're my bosses' bosses' boss, go to hell.'" In

its dealings with the provinces, Beijing is frequently all thumbs. The Chinese

state today is no unitary actor — if it ever was.

Even more importantly, the readers of this volume seek to "bring society

back in." Where Western studies of Chinese politics have generally taken a

top-down approach, highlighting state dominance, we seek to recover the

voices and roles that the common Chinese people play in Chinese politics.

China is not a formal democracy, but Chinese "popular opinion," is not an

ortodox." The Chinese people — peasants, workers, students — are increas-

ingly contesting the legitimacy of the current regime; analyses would be wise

not to ignore them.

We thus seek to reconstruct and re-conceptualize our understandings of both

"state" and "society." Our conceptual move is deceptively simple: adding an

"s." Speaking in the plural of "state" and "society" liberates us from the

beguiling but decidedly Liberal notion of a David society fighting valiantly

against a Goliath state. State and social actors in China, we find, are not

always unitary and anarchic; they can and often do form alliances with

each other and against other political groups. Conversely, there can be

conflicts among these actors. For instance, the peasants in neighboring

villages may have very different attitudes toward the local tax collector.

Central to the analysis of such diverse forms of political contention is the

interrogation of the dynamics of interaction between political actors. Follow-

ing Max Weber, we maintain that power and authority are not static

attributes or things that particular actors possess. Instead, power and

authoriy exist in relationships. We customarily say that "John is powerful" or

"John has power," but what we really mean, is that "John has power over

Jim and Jill." Power and authority are relational, negotiated through a

continuous process of change and responses. Thus, a local cadre may


successfully claim authority before one group of peasants, but not before another group. As Neil Diamant has noted in a recent discussion of Mao’s China, “Different institutions were afforded different degrees of legitimacy by different classes, at different times and in different regions of the country.” 12 Legitimacy, in Mao’s China and today, is never a state possession, instead, state and social action continuously contest it. “State” and “society” are mutually constituted in the process.

In addition to being relational, power can be thought of as a continuum, with coercive forms of power at one end, and more legitimate or authoritative forms of power at the other. 15 When the state’s claims to legitimacy are not affirmed, or when protests openly defy its authority, the state can resort to force. This is indeed what the CCP did so dramatically during the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. But resorting to violence only underlines the legitimacy of the state before the people – and no state can survive too long by force alone.

Mao Zedong knew this. He is well known in the West for saying that “Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” 14 Less well known, but, we argue, equally important, was Mao’s argument at the onset of the Cultural Revolution that “When you make revolution, you must first manage public opinion.” 15 Mao understood the need to deploy both coercive and legitimate forms of power.

What combination of coercive and legitimate forms of power is the Chinese state currently deploying? In which direction along the coercive-legitimate continuum of power is the 21st-century Chinese policy heading? If social actors increasingly reject the legitimacy of state power, will the state progressively resort to force? A People’s Republic relying on coercive and not legitimate power is not likely to last very long. Conversely, if the state’s various claims to legitimacy are successful, the regime will not need to rely on coercion, and will likely remain stable well into the 21st century.

Between Heaven and Earth

Legitimacy is central to politics everywhere. The specific rules that govern its contestation, however, vary across both time and space. In traditional China, it was the literati who legitimated or de- legitimated the regime by conferring positive or negative status upon it. As interpreters of the political classics and custodians of the “Mandate of Heaven,” the literati could and often did challenge the emperor’s legitimacy claims. Proponents of the “Criminal despotism” and “totalitarian” views of Chinese politics fail to grasp this crucial ruler-literati dynamic. For instance, Western scholars often point to the examination system as evidence of the literati’s dependence on the imperial state: co-opted into the state system, they are seen as lacking the autonomy so essential to pluralist politics. 17 However, if we step back from Eurocentric assumptions about the public sphere to think about politics from a Chinese perspective, the examination system can be seen as evidence of the literati’s independence. In his 212 Religion of China, Max Weber rightly argues that the examinations were a basis of the literati’s own authority. In imperial China, especially after the Han Dynasty, “literary education was the yardstick of social prestige.” Weber stresses the “magico- charismatic meaning” of the examinations in the eyes of the people: the successful examination candidate was “by no means a mere applicant for office qualified by knowledge. He was a proved holder of magical qualities.” 18 As historian Mark Edward Lewis has recently argued, by elevating the idealized past of the Zhou Dynasty above contemporary dynasties, the literati were able to claim “independence vis-a-vis the state.” 19 Where appeals to the past are generally seen as “conservative” in the West, they are frequently “progressive” in the Chinese context. Again we see how Western assumptions can blind us to the realities of Chinese politics.

In addition to possessing their own charismatic and legal-rational authority, the literati also played a vital role in checking the emperor’s legitimacy claims. Emperors that sought legitimate forms of power were forced to respond to the literati’s claims of the literati custodians of sacred texts. Traditional norms and the requirements of proof for his charismatic claims limited the emperor’s charismatic-traditional authority. Chinese cosmology, which held that the worlds of man and nature were united in a yin-yang balance, was the basis of political rule. A deviation from orthodoxy Confucianism in the world of politics was seen as leading to natural disasters. The literati, Weber notes, were an independent status group responsible for this orthodoxy. Thus, “every generally threatening event at one placed power in the hands of the literati. For such events were considered the result of a breach of tradition and a desecration of the classic way of life, which the literati guarded.” 20 The literati thus “limited the power of the chief by making him dependent on a definite social group.” 21 Historian Wang Aihe has recently explored the Han Dynasty competition “between scholar-officials, who defined and confined emperors by systems of cosmology and monopolizing moral authority and the emperor and his hired religious specialists, who resisted the constraints of moral authority.” The Chinese character for king (wáng) visually depicts the terms of this contest: the three horizontal strokes represent the three realms of Heaven, Man, and Earth, while the vertical stroke connecting the three signifies the sovereign. The emperor, Wang Aihe forcefully, did not possess power, but was the “prime” responsible for keeping the three realms aligned: “emperorship in Han China was culturally and symbolically produced and reproduced, constantly being contested within cosmological discourse.” 22 In imperial China, in short, rulers needed the approval of the literati if they were to wield legitimate power.

In the post-revolutionary period, intellectuals carried on the traditions of the traditional literati. Recognizing that intellectuals checked his power, Mao persistently attacked them, denouncing them “literati” (shihulai)
the "stirking ninth class" (shuyuangjia). At the same time, however, Mao often needed intellectuals, and was able to make use of groups of literati throughout his career. This was perhaps particularly the case during the Cultural Revolution, when his opponents occupied the highest ranks of the Communist Party. Thus, he ensured that some of the key members of the Cultural Revolution small group, responsible for propelling Mao's revolutionary agenda during this political movement, were intellectuals. These radical intellectuals, in turn, were supported by students and intellectuals. The use of force to silence intellectuals during periods like the Anti-Rightist Movement of the late 1950s signaled reversions to coercive forms of power, they did not have an impact on the role of intellectuals in the steamroller of the Communist Party. As with Mao, Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and the Party elders' 1989 decision to use force against the students in Tiananmen marked a return to coercion.

Their earlier agreement to meet with Wang Anshu and other student leader during the Beijing Spring, however, demonstrates that they also recognized the continuing role of intellectuals in legitimizing the regime.

Although the continuities outweigh the changes, the communications revolution and Deng Xiaoping's policy of 'reform and opening' (gonghe kaiyang) have had a significant impact on the nature of legitimacy in China today. Specifically, the language of legitimacy is evolving, and instances of popular opinion have better views of the political stage.

First, the language of Chinese politics is undergoing what we call "depoliticization." This is changing both the nature and the role of popular opinion in China. By "depoliticizing" or restricting the political code, proponents under Mao and Deng were able to control political discourse. As the 1990s see a surge in the power of intellectuals, while Deng's attempts to continue in this tradition today, the Party will seek to control politics by "saying the same thing" (lingshuo) for everything from key political events to whether music should be "Heil" in English or discuss Christmas on their radio shows.

However, while China's elites were never able to attain their goal of completely monopolizing political discourse (yaozhang), that goal is now farther away than ever. Economic reform has led to the proliferation of media at the local level. While Jiang and Deng's "Rectification of the Press Campaigns" were somewhat successful in reducing the number of non-party publications, decentralization has made the media more difficult for the Party to control. Unofficial publications, distributed through the "second channel" (quandian), are proliferating. And financial autonomy has further reduced the media's dependency on the state. The communications revolution, meanwhile, has greatly increased the number of voices participating in political discourse. Politics is a frequent topic in Chinese chatrooms, e-mail, newsgroups, and Internet websites. These developments have led to a deinstitutionalization of the political discourse in the mainland. An expanded political vocabulary allows a greater number of actors to appear on the political stage, giving them greater latitude in their performances, and making them harder to control.

A second notable change in state legitimacy today is that audiences of popular opinion have a better view of the political stage. Although officially, books and magazines are not politics, and even the personal lives of the elite, are bestialized, Jinjun Han's account of the historical function that the "public sphere" played in Europe is pertinent here: with the open discussion of elite politics, the secrecy and mystery underlying traditional authority are stripped away. Similarly, popular opinion argues that Chinese society and politics today, Zhang Yi of Nanning University Press has argued that the fear of losing face constrains behavior, leading to shyness in social relations. Concern for maintaining face has the same disciplining impact on politics. Political elites, increasingly "in the people's gaze" (rumei guaiyi) with the telecommunication revolution, are not always very comfortable. As a Chinese friend told Taue correspondent Jaime Fierro, "The Chinese emperor is now wearing a bikini."

In sum, the information revolution and China's two decades of "reform and opening" have significantly altered the nature of political contention in China today. The number and variety of actors has proliferated dramatically, destabilizing political discourse and making it harder for the state to control. And the audience watching political dramas has also expanded, increasingly disciplining the political actors on stage and defining their freedom of movement.

Contested claims

The twelve chapters of this volume investigate the dynamic political contention in China as the turn of the 21st century. We begin with an exploration of the lexis or grammars underlying the Chinese state's claims to legitimacy. Vivienne Shue (Chapter 1) argues that "embodied in the very topic of legitimation advanced by a system of domination we can find the grammar that may be used most effectively by citizens and subjects ...." In the resistance to that system, "Subaltern, Subaltern, Subaltern, and Subaltern are three of the key legities of legitimation in China today. Focusing on Truth, Shue explores why the Chinese state seems a seemingly hollow sect of mystics, the Falun Gong as a threat. Citizens and subjects almost never swallow the legitimacy claims of their rulers. Even at the most paralyzing of authoritarian political moments, popular discontent and disbelief are commonly expressed as people negotiate the precise terms on which they will give their obedience to the state. Employing a multi-stranded and multi-layered conceptualization of the dynamics of political authority in China today, Shue argues that the Chinese state clearly interprets the Falun Gong as a dire challenge to its claim to possess the moral Truth,
Shue's discussion of the sources of legitimacy is also important because it leads us directly toward an assessment of the new relationship between central and local authorities, a theme that is common in several of our chapters. The issue of legitimacy and its relationship to civil society is one of the most pressing issues of Chinese politics today. In this section, we will examine how the changes in the political system have affected the legitimacy of the Chinese state and the challenges it faces in maintaining its stability.

Shue's analysis is based on the idea that legitimacy is not simply a matter of power and prestige, but also a function of the quality of governance. He argues that the Chinese government has been successful in maintaining its legitimacy by providing a stable and prosperous society. However, he also notes that the government must continue to address the challenges of poverty and inequality in order to maintain its legitimacy.

The Chinese government has made significant progress in recent years in addressing these challenges. The government has implemented a number of policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality, and has made significant investments in education and health care. These efforts have helped to improve the quality of life for many people in China, and have contributed to the government's legitimacy.

However, there are still significant challenges that the government must address in order to maintain its legitimacy. These include the issue of corruption, which remains a significant problem in many parts of the country. The government must also address the issue of political freedom, which is still limited in China. Shue notes that the government must be more transparent and accountable in order to maintain the trust of the Chinese public.

In conclusion, Shue's analysis provides a valuable perspective on the challenges facing the Chinese government in maintaining its legitimacy. The government must continue to work to address these challenges in order to ensure the continued stability of the Chinese state.
eyes but not in others. In particular, he looks at rigged local elections in rural China. O'Brien argues that examining episodes of contestation between official politics and other means can help locate the Chinese regime across a number of dimensions what is institutionalized and what is not, what is participation and what is resistance, who is a challenger and who is a party member, what citizenship entails and who enjoys it. O'Brien depicts Chinese state power as both fragmented and divided against itself. In common with several other contributors, what emerges in his chapter is a multi-layered state that has grand aspirations but formidable principal-agent problems. In other words, lacking complete information about local conditions, officials in Beijing have difficulty controlling the behavior of local cadres whose interests may diverge from Beijing's. Thus, these contrasting collective actions can take advantage of China's limited institutionalization to "waste shop" uncovering supporters in various bureaucracies and at different levels of the political system who have a stake in seeing their appeal addressed. Furthermore, because they use the regime's own policies and media myths to justify their actions, their "rightful resistance" is difficult to dismiss.

In her comparison of the China Democracy Party (CDP) and the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), Teresa Wright (Chapter 6) uses interviews and documentary research to explore the contested nature of state legitimacy and the fragmented nature of state power in China today. The initial CCP response to the formation of the CDP was confused and ambivalent, with CCP activists—"not like the "rightful resisters" O'Brien discussed—consistently playing on openings created by the lack of clear central direction. While the CCP has asserted its legitimacy based on a claim to represent "the masses," the CDP focused on the constitutional definition of legitimate rule, emphasizing the creation of a government established through the conscious approval of the public through free, impartial, and direct democratic elections. Moreover, in a roughly similar way to the workers in Westen's chapter, those who contested the CCP's core ideological claims, the CDP's new concept of political legitimacy challenged the symbolic power of the CCP to unilaterally define "right and wrong." The CLB, by contrast, challenges not only the CDP's claim to truth, but also its claim to beneficent care for the Chinese worker. Wright describes how China's continuing market transition and immiseration has led workers to have changed the form and method of intellectual dissent in striking ways.

While the role of the CCP is discussed in virtually every chapter in this book, only Bruce Dickson's contribution (Chapter 7) directly assesses the Party's strategy for handling social conflicts confronting them at the onset of the 21st century. Dickson examines the role of social conflicts and reform as a means of discovery. The CASS survey offers empirical data that strongly supports Dickson's conclusions, but also suggests the unbalanced nature of these trends. The CASS study, citing official statistics, notes that the percentage of Party members among private enterprise owners climbed from 13.1 per cent in 1993 to 17.1 per cent in 1995, and 19.8 per cent in 2000. Even more striking is the composition of Party members among private enterprise owners and industrial workers in the four cities and counties that the survey examined in detail. These figures vary significantly, depending on a number of factors: the local government's policies toward private entrepreneurs. What is clear, however, is that the differential pattern of CCP recruitment, with highly modernized areas actively recruiting the "winners" of economic reform. In other words, lacking complete information about local conditions, officials in Beijing have difficulty controlling the behavior of local cadres whose interests may diverge from Beijing's. Thus, these contrasting collective actions can take advantage of China's limited institutionalization to "waste shop" uncovering supporters in various bureaucracies and at different levels of the political system who have a stake in seeing their appeal addressed. Furthermore, because they use the regime's own policies and media myths to justify their actions, their "rightful resistance" is difficult to dismiss.

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across generations by way of an increasingly commercialized educational system where access to schooling has become increasingly dependent on one's family wealth. Strikingly, the regime is openly encouraging, if at least not discouraging, these changes in common with Dickson. Rosen finds growing numbers of young people applying for Party membership, and the Party still holding appeal as an effective patronage machine, providing opportunities for youth entering the job market. He also offers corroborative data to Wright's analysis on why young adults in their twenties who have been the most active participants in most of the major political movements in the post-Mao period and in demonstrations in other countries have not been particularly active in the CDP. But neither have people in any other age group, given the tiny appeal that the Party had.

Nationalism is an important part of the appeal. By providing a ideological legitimacy for a Party-state state ideologically, and the chapters by Peter Hays Grier and Richard Kraus (Chapters 9 and 10 respectively) speak directly to this issue. Focusing on the "fourth generation" of third-generation nationalists in China, Grier argues that although anti-Chinese substance of popular nationalism today is largely congruent with that of official state nationalism, it is challenging the state's hegemony over nationalism discourse. Interrogating the several waves of nationalism in late-1990s China — the Diaoyu Islands protests of 1996, the China Sound No sensation of 1996-97, and the Belt and Road conferences of 1999-2000 — Gries argues that the CCP remains an important part of each with a different combination of suppression and co-optation, largely suppressing Diaoyu protests, seeking to co-opt and utilize the China Sound No fever, and serving just to respond to the demands of angry Belt and Road demonstrators. This movement away from suppression and towards co-optation suggests the emergence of a popular nationalism that is increasingly challenging the CCP's claims to totalitarian legitimacy.

Through the power of nationalism, legitimacy often attaches itself to specific cultural phenomena or even objects. Working at the intersection of politics and culture, Richard Kraus explores the Chinese state's response to popular pressure to recover art looted by imperialists in the 19th century, thereby erasing the shame of national humiliation. The episode of the Lost Chinese Animal Heads凝视 the Chinese army against the Western elite arts establishment, and raised questions about China's position in the global cultural economy. Kraus argues that political legitimacy must be won on two fronts. Domestic populations must believe in their rulers' right to occupy office, but foreign states must also believe that the leading officials really reside in the state. Kraus suggests that this "two front" battle for legitimacy presents a basic contradiction. The search for domestic legitimacy through repatriation lost art may hinder China's efforts at gaining greater international acceptance. As Chinese tourism, a difficult rising power in economic and military affairs may also see the Chinese politics of art repatriation as a "high art" example of revanchist behavior toward the existing international aesthetic order.

Examining the complicated issue of Han-minority relations, Colin Mackerras (Chapter 11) uncovers patterns familiar from the previous chapters. For example, market forces and modernization have exerted a profound impact on all ethnic groups in China, weakening the pull of traditional cultures and offering opportunities to those who advocate for Chinese identity. The Chinese state, relying on standard of living, see their interests inextricably linked with cooperation with the Han, even if feelings of ethnic identity can point in the opposite direction. Mackerras concludes that in China, there are important distinctions among the fifty-five state-recognized minority ethnic groups, noting that religion and ethnicity counts for more in determining New Tibetans and Uighurs feel about their Chinese identity than in the legitimacy of the Chinese state among such groups as the Koreans or Zhuang, because the sense of identity of the former is stronger and based more solidly on historical requirements.

Can these different modes of political contention in China today be better grasped in comparative perspective? Harley Balzer (Chapter 12) concludes the volume with an exploration of how the experience of the communist "extinction" in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe can inform our understanding of the evolution of state-society relations in China today. He argues that it is "civic society" — not "civil society" — that best captures the independence of state and social actors in both Russia and China today. Both are "tamed pluralism" under which their own political and social diversity in a common attempt to maintain their monopolies of political power.

The twelve chapters of the volume thus explore the many different kinds of claims that state actors today make to legitimacy, the various responses that social actors make to these claims, and their own countercultural responses. Can we teach us about the future of Chinese politics? Are the CCP's days numbered? Or will it adapt and endure well into the 21st century?

State legitimacy in 21st-century China

In June 1989, the CCP elite chose to deploy coercive power. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre, therefore, the regime faced the daunting task of not just polishing its image, but restoring its legitimacy. If it did so by emphasizing performance, both economic and moral, and de-emphasizing communist ideology. Regime legitimacy was to be restored by persuading the populace that the CCP was the best — indeed the only — viable form of governance. Here is another example of what could make Chinese citizens rich (the economic component) and the country powerful (the moral component), and why this is the most effective way of making people care.

According to Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" to jumpstart the market economy, the CCP focused on raising the standard of living of the urban population, particularly those in the coastal cities who were best
situated to take advantage of the state's new economic initiatives. Along with rising incomes, the state relaxed certain social controls so that, for example, parents could choose primary and secondary schools for their children, university graduates could choose their own jobs rather than be compelled to accept a state job allocation, and strict residential requirements (the "hukou" system) were relaxed, so that individuals could migrate in search of employment or a better life. 34

In addition to offering them a degree of social and economic freedom, the People's Republic offered its citizens a more varied cultural life. China in the 1990s witnessed an explosion of "taboo" literature and sensationalistic magazines. The elimination of state subsidies and the necessity for all cultural organizations to market their wares has brought forth television programs and newspapers such as "Focus Point Inquiry" (Yuebaifang dandian) and "Sunrise Weekend" (Nanyang shangzhou) that have won broad popular approval by emphasizing investigative journalism and the exposure of corruption. Evening entertainment was enhanced with the increase in the number of discos and karaoke bars, and the import of ten "blockbuster" movies per year, beginning with The Righteous in October 1994 and including Tao Zao, with a box-office take of over US$44 million, the most financially successful movie ever shown in China. 35 The increasing penetration of cosmetics, toiletries, and other such Western wares spearheaded a virtual revolution in consumer goods. Indeed, cadres of neighborhood waste committees, long responsible for regulating and reporting on most aspects of residents' daily lives, are now serving foreign corporations by delivering product samples door to door and selling cable television subsystems. In this new environment, traditional ideological appeals to implement Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought and build a socialist China find little resonance among the public. However, the state has been very successful in promoting "patriotism" (mianzi nanzuo) to supplant the discredited system of political virtue that had been so important a part of the socialization process for all Chinese prior to the reforms.

We find, then, the formidable sources of regime legitimacy to buttress the Party-state in the face of the types of problems described in the chapters that follow. The future of the Chinese state may be far from clear, but there is little evidence that it is in imminent peril. 36

The Chinese regime has not succumbed to the fate of the former Soviet Union and its erstwhile Eastern European allies, and yet it faces protests from a wide variety of social groups. A lively literature has thus emerged, debating the future of the Chinese Party-state. "Pessimism" argues for the almost inevitable collapse of the regime, while "optimism" predicts China's equally inevitable rise to superpower status by the mid-21st century. 37

One frequent topic in the scholarly literature is the likelihood of Chinese democratisation. When the Journal of Democracy invited contributions in late 2002, following the 16th Party Congress, for a special issue on China's future, even the editors of the journal were surprised by the diversity of opinion that surfaced. Their contributors, like ours, were divided over how to reconcile the regime's successes, including rapid economic growth, massive social transformations, and relative political stability, with the obvious challenges to the sustainability of this success. These challenges include structural weaknesses in the economy, a marked increase in income inequality, and a closed political system that is increasingly incongruent with an economy more and more oriented toward the market. 38

Some contributors argued over how institutionalized and regularized the political and legal systems had become, and whether institutional reform--including the development of "input institutions" such as the Chinese regime's public media, which help the regime respond to public needs more quickly and effectively--had contributed to elite unity and government effectiveness, and thereby enhanced regime legitimacy. 39 Other contributors disagreed over whether the inclusion of new social elites--such as the middle-class and private enterprise owners--would contribute to the successful growth of democratization, or whether they could embark on democratization. Finally, there was contention over China's "state-society relations," with leading supporters divided over whether the regime had "unrigorized" its governing institutions, or is facing a "governance crisis." 40 Two Chinese contributors were particularly pessimistic. Chen An, focusing on an ever-widening inequalities and social cleavages, suggests that the CCP faces an impossible dilemma: it cannot recover support from its traditional base among the workers and peasants through the redistribution of wealth without alienating the newly rich groups it has so assiduously co-opted in recent years. But the bleaker view comes from He Qinglai, the author of the 1997 Chinese best-seller The Pitfalls of Modernization. Writing after her move to the West in 2002, she characterizes Chinese politics as "vicious," suggesting that current stability masks the likelihood of a sudden and dramatic regime collapse. 41

These debates took on added urgency when the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic emerged at the end of 2002 and quickly spread to Beijing and beyond China's borders. The Chinese leadership's reaction to SARS presents a fascinating case study of what has and has not changed in state society relations, and the most important--both domestic and foreign--that constrain a country which has become integrated into the global community.

Although SARS erupted as early as November 2002, it was not reported to Central authorities until February 2003. The Chinese news media was under a continuing ban not to report on the outbreak. In addition to being state secrets, epidemics are bad for business. Official statements and press reports repeatedly reported the Chinese government controlling SARS, with a reassuring, and soon to be embarrassing, 28-page pamphlet entitled SARS Is Not Terrible quickly becoming a best-seller in mainland bookstores. Meanwhile, alternative sources of information were providing a far more alarming picture, mixing the known facts with a host of wild rumors.
The new leadership under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, in office only since their ratification by the National People's Congress on 19 March 2003, faced an immediate credibility crisis. On 17 April, at an unscheduled but carefully planned meeting of China's leading policy-making body, the Politburo of the CCP, Hu acknowledged previous government misinformation on the severity of the disease and committed the Party to full mobilization against the epidemic. The mayor of Beijing and the minister of public health were summarily fired for covering up the seriousness of SARS. "Iron Lady" Wu Yi and other respected officials associated with Zhu Rongji, the reformist former premier, were put in charge of containing the disease. Detailed data on the illness began to be released daily, and inspectors from the World Health Organization (WHO) were granted unprecedented access. Altering the government's previous ban on publicity, the Chinese media were now given more freedom to report on the crisis, and public opinion agencies, initially constrained from revealing their survey results on popular knowledge about SARS, were now allowed to share their findings with the media, so long as the results were "truthful and objective."

In a successful effort to restore lost credibility, the Hu-Wen leadership team moved swiftly around the country and filled the airwaves with exhortations to defeat the epidemic. After this dramatic reverse course, opinion polls showed a rising confidence in the new leadership.46

Such a striking volte-face caused a jolt not only in China, but among China-watching analysts as well. Once again, optimists and pessimists diverged in their interpretations of the new leadership's performance. Many began to ask whether SARS could become "China's Chernobyl," in reference to the explosion of a nuclear reactor in that Soviet city in April 1986. Concern only a year after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Chernobyl has generally been regarded as an important accelerator for his program of glasnost ("openness") and perestroika ("restructuring"), and ultimately for the fall of the Soviet Union, its Communist Party, and the Soviet empire.47

Optimists pointed to Beijing's dramatic policy reversal as a harbinger of bolder steps toward political openness in the future. Pessimists, by contrast, noted that SARS was slowing China's economic growth, threatening the regime's performance legitimacy. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of "openness," the government maintained tight control over how the campaign against SARS was to be reported. While little if any public criticism of the earlier cover-up was tolerated, the official media were the CCP as the driving force behind the population against the disease. Hundreds were arrested for spreading "rumors" through the text-messaging system (SMS) on mobile phones. The CCP, in an effort to hunt down possible SARS cases apart from by apartment, resuscitated its network of community activists, suggesting at least a temporary return to Mao-style mass campaigns— not progress towards democratization.48

However, as John Pomfret has argued in the Washington Post, the reasons for the dramatic policy reversal reveal the immense domestic and interna-

3. In short, Timothy Cheek and Carol Hurmult's discussion of "establishment intellectuals" also highlights the dependency of intellectuals on their political patrons: see "Introduction: collaboration and conflict in the search for a new order" in their edited volume, China's Establishment Intellectuals (Ann Arbor: M.E. Sharpe, 1986).


5. Zhao Dibiao defines legal-ideological, ideological, and performance legitimacy on the three basic arenas of state legitimation during 1980s China. The state was authoritarian, society was poorly organized, and state legitimation was based on moral and economic performance. This particular triad-society relationship, in conjunction with the great uncertainty brought about by state-led economic reform, led to the rise and shaped the development of the 1989 movement. See Dingyan Zhao, The Power of Tianmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 5-35.

6. Three recent edited volumes also examine these-society relations in China. In Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China (Beijing: Westview Press, 1994), editors Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Elizabeth Perry had broader aims than ours, with protest tied to larger issues of Chinese political culture. In Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Rebirth in the People's Republic (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), editors Elizabeth Perry and Mary Selden note that although an extensive literature has been created on China's remarkable economic transformation, there has been relatively more scholarly concern devoted to its social and political consequences. "The realisation of the reform agenda," The Perry/Selden volume introduces Chinese society through an examination of the conflicts and "dominant modes of resistance" engendered by the reforms. Such resistance is also one of the themes we explore. However, Chinese Society contains little explicit discussion of legitimacy — the core of our volume — although their emphasis on resistance implies more legitimacy is under construction. See also The Chinese State: Strategies, Societies, and Security (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) editors Guangli Yang and Bruce Dickson begin by noting the partial success of the Peking's post-Tiananmen strategy. By surrendering some of its control over the economy and society, and allowing more economic growth and a more liberal cultural life to emerge, the Communist Party has sought to increase its legitimacy and strengthen its authority.


10. Legitimacy is here understood as the political type or subset of the broader concept of authority.

11. Mao Zedong, "Problems of strategy in revolution's revolutionary" (December 1930), Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung (the "Little Red Book") (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965). The resonance of this Mao text in the West loudlyupertised Liberal fears of "unharnessed" and state coercion.