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## **In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In**

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## **In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In**

### **Abstract**

The contemporary politics of China reflect an ongoing effort by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to claim the right to rule in light of the consequences of economic development, international pressures, and historical change. China stands out within the Asian region for the success the regime has achieved in this effort. By focusing on the changes in China's elite discourse during the reform period and particularly during the last decade, this paper aims to elaborate on the relative importance of various sources of legitimacy as they shift over time, as well as on their inherent dilemmas and limitations. There is evidence of an agile, responsive, and creative party effort to relegitimize the post-revolutionary regime through economic performance, nationalism, ideology, culture, governance, and democracy. At the same time, the paper identifies a clear shift in emphasis from an earlier economic-nationalistic approach to a more ideological-institutional approach.

Keywords: regime legitimacy, China, Chinese Communist Party, performance, nationalism, ideology, culturalism, governance, democracy

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Auf der Suche nach Legitimität in China**

Die Versuche der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas (KPCh), vor dem Hintergrund wirtschaftlicher Entwicklung, internationalen Drucks und historischer Veränderungen die Legitimität ihrer Herrschaft zu wahren, prägen die gegenwärtige Politik Chinas. Innerhalb der asiatischen Region kann China dabei als vergleichsweise erfolgreich gelten. Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, mit Blick auf Änderungen im innerchinesischen Elitediskurs während der Reformperiode und vor allem während des zurückliegenden Jahrzehnts, zu untersuchen, auf welche Legitimitätsquellen zurückgegriffen wird, wie ihre relative Bedeutung sich im Zeitverlauf verändert, und welche inhärenten Dilemmata und Beschränkungen damit verbunden sind. Identifiziert werden wirtschaftliche Performanz, Nationalismus, Ideologie, Kultur, Governance und Demokratie als die wichtigsten Quellen zur Relegitimierung eines durchaus agilen, responsiven und kreativen postrevolutionären Parteiregimes. Zugleich wird gezeigt, dass dabei eine klare Akzentverschiebung stattgefunden hat, und zwar von einem früheren Ansatz, der sich primär auf Wirtschaftswachstum und Nationalismus stützte, hin zu einem Ansatz, der Aspekte des ideologischen und institutionellen Wandels betont.

# In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In

**Heike Holbig / Bruce Gilley**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Legitimacy in History
- 3 Legitimacy Levels
- 4 Determining Sources of Legitimacy
- 5 Conclusion

## **1 Introduction**

China is the world's largest ongoing experiment in a form of regime—authoritarianism—that is supposed to be in global decline.<sup>1</sup> It accounts for 58 percent of the world's population that Freedom House considers as living under an “unfree” regime. Unlike most of the world's authoritarian regimes, which pretend or promise to deliver democracy, the ruling CCP explicitly rejects “Western-style” democracy as a suitable political system for China. This makes the country an object of particular fascination to students of comparative politics.

Comparativists have long associated authoritarian regimes with two main flaws: a lack of institutionalization and a lack of legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> China has provided evidence of both; hence it is fundamentally challenging old assumptions about the nature and stability of authoritarian regimes.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Griffith University conference “The Search for Legitimacy: Managing the Political Consequences of Asian Development”, National University of Singapore, June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this paper, legitimacy is defined according to the seminal work of David Beetham (1991). According to Beetham, “power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that (i) it conforms to established rules (conventional and/or constitutional-legal), (ii) the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate, and (iii) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate” (Beetham 1991: 16; cf. Gilley 2009: 8). For a discussion of the use of legitimacy concepts in nondemocratic contexts, cf. Holbig (forthcoming).

Crucial to the contemporary study of the durability of the CCP regime is the question of popular legitimacy. While a debate exists about the relative importance of institutional versus legitimacy-based sources of regime durability in China, there is a broad consensus that the current regime in China enjoys relatively robust legitimacy across the population. Most also agree that the erosion of that legitimacy would have grave consequences, not just directly but also indirectly through the erosion of the institutional sources of regime stability themselves (internal party discipline, control of the media, co-optation of the middle class, etc.).

In popular discussions, and even in many academic ones, the reasons for regime legitimacy in China are typically reduced to two main factors: economic growth and nationalism. "China's regime retains authority by means of patriotism and performance-based legitimacy," says Roskin (2009: 426). Pan writes that "The government has grown expert at [...] rallying nationalist sentiment to its side [...] [while] the extended boom has enhanced the party's reputation" (Pan 2008: 323). Laliberté and Lanteigne write that the CCP's claims to legitimacy, "in a nutshell, are encapsulated in the notion that only the CCP is able to ensure economic growth, provide social stability, and defend national sovereignty" (Laliberté and Lanteigne 2008: 8). There is a good factual basis for this claim: the importance attached to economic growth and nationalism has remained high in response to a World Values Survey (WVS) question asking people to cite "the most important goal for the country." Positive answers accounted for a combined 73 percent of responses in 2007 (down slightly from 87 percent when the question was first asked in 1990).

Yet a closer examination of the quest for legitimacy in China reveals the importance of two additional clusters of legitimacy sources:

- 1) ideology and the collective social values that it supports, as well as, more recently, culturalism;
- 2) governance, including the ways in which the regime has been able to define democracy and rights in terms of rational-legal governance, internal security and stability, and socio-economic freedoms.

We do not challenge the importance of growth and of nationalism. However, we believe that they are insufficient to explain the legitimation of the CCP regime. The key to understanding the party's search for legitimacy, we believe, lies in analyzing its ability to construct and influence the subjective values and meanings against which its performance is measured. There has been a clear shift in emphasis in Chinese elites' approach to re-legitimizing the post-revolutionary regime: from the economic-nationalistic approach of the early reform period to the ideological-institutional approach of recent years. It is little surprise, then, that "party building," which includes both ideological and institutional dimensions, is a central aspect of legitimation strategies.

After a brief outline of the historical dimension of the CCP's legitimacy and a discussion of the various levels of legitimacy in China, the paper will analyze the various sources of

legitimacy. By focusing on developments during the reform period and particularly during the last decade, it aims to elaborate on the relative importance of these sources over time as well as on their inherent dilemmas and limitations.

## 2 Legitimacy in History

The legitimacy of the CCP has always been contested and often explicitly rejected by significant portions of China's population. The civil war that preceded the CCP's victory in 1949 reflected a profoundly divided population. Eastman described the situation as "little [...] support [...] on the Nationalist side; some [...] support [...] on the Communist side" (Eastman 1984: 88). Millions fled from China (including one million to Hong Kong alone, of whom 385,000 remained by 1954) rather than submitting to Communist authority, creating what Peterson calls "one of the largest refugee flows in world history" (Peterson 2008: 172).

Within the country, rebel counterinsurgencies continued until 1951 in Han areas. Anti-CCP insurgents captured 31 of 79 county capitals in the southwest province of Guizhou in 1950 before finally being crushed in "bandit suppression" campaigns by the end of 1951 (Brown 2007: 114). Tibet and Xinjiang were subdued by force.

It is generally assumed (though elusive to prove) that in its earliest years, from 1949 to 1956, the PRC successfully established its legitimacy through revolutionary ideology and myths, and through concrete performance—ending civil conflict, controlling inflation, and rebuilding the economy. With the excesses of the anti-rightist campaign of 1956, increasing inner-party conflict, and then the disastrous Great Leap Famine of 1959–1961, that legitimacy began to ebb (although ironically, one Chinese scholar still argues today that the party launched the Great Leap Forward to *restore* its legitimacy) (Deng 2009). By 1976 party leaders believed that the party's popular standing—as opposed to "elite legitimacy" among party elders, military leaders, co-opted minority elites, or zealous educated youths—was at an all-time low. The party faced a genuine legitimacy crisis.

The reform era can be seen as an attempt to rebuild legitimacy along post-revolutionary lines. The motivations were primarily domestic. This effort accelerated with the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. Other external events—the rise of human rights interventionism, the Kuomintang's loss of power in Taiwan in 2000, and the pressures resulting from China's entry into the World Trade Organization—are variously cited by Chinese party analysts in explaining the heightened attention to the party's moral authority over society. No less important, the changing nature of Chinese society—the development of a large private sector, the disappearance of an industrial proletariat, and sharp intergenerational shifts in values—also put the party on guard.

In 2004 a party declaration warned, "The party's governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all" (Resolution 2004). As a member of the Shanghai party committee's research arm put it,

That statement contained within it a profound historical lesson that we learned from the Soviet collapse, namely that if we do not [...] prevent and overcome the threat of legitimacy crisis, living only by the old dictum that “anyone can rule by force alone” then it is not inconceivable that we will follow the same path as the Soviet Union.

(Zhou 2006: 250-1)

Shambaugh calls the 2004 decision “probably the most important” party document since the 1978 plenum decision that launched the reform movement (Shambaugh 2008: 124).

In the following years an intensive debate emerged among the party’s intellectuals on the explicit question of legitimacy. The number of articles discussing party legitimacy in a representative sample of 36 party-school journals rose from just 14 in 2002 to a peak of 84 in 2006 (Gilley 2008). Only a few scattered voices among the hard-line party ideologues pointed out that Marxist parties should by definition not be debating their own legitimacy because “raising the question of whether China should still be led by the CCP” could have “serious negative consequences” (Xin 2005). This debate in turn has provided the basis for a constant and restless quest to adjust, change, modify, and sometimes radically alter aspects of public policy and state institutions in order to conform to the perceived demands of legitimacy. Wang Shaoguang has talked about a new “popular pressures” model of policy making in China that has resulted in “an impressive congruence between the priorities of the public and the priorities of the Chinese government” (Wang 2008: 81). The search for legitimacy is at the center of contemporary Chinese politics.

The concern with legitimacy parallels similar concerns in other post-revolutionary communist states, especially those in Vietnam, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. Toma and Völgyes wrote that after the break with despotism in 1956 in Hungary, “legitimacy [...] became a primary goal” of the political system, first through nationalism and economic growth and later through political participation and social freedoms (Toma and Völgyes 1977: 19). What sets the CCP apart, we believe, is its refusal to abandon ideological legitimation in the face of globally dominant liberal values, and its success in institutionalizing many aspects of the global “good governance” agenda without ceding power to social actors.

### 3 Legitimacy Levels

Most measurements find that in the post-Tiananmen period, the party succeeded in rebuilding its popular legitimacy. Gilley (Gilley 2006), using both attitudinal and behavioral data at the aggregate level, finds that China was a “high legitimacy” state from a comparative perspective in the late 1990s to early 2000s, ranking thirteenth out of 72 states considered, and second in Asia only to Taiwan. Other quantitative measures report similar results (Chen 2004; Wang 2005).

Such findings are based on mean-centered models of measurement. However, the CCP's own attempts to measure its legitimacy, like those of the GDR or of Stalin himself, tend towards a more disaggregated microlevel approach that is more concerned with variance. Based upon how it deals with seemingly insignificant "mass incidents" and how it studies their potential effects, the CCP appears to look for nodes of legitimacy crisis, in both social and geographic spaces, perhaps based on the view that delegitimation can occur quickly as a result of "mass incidents" or other forms of mass mobilization triggering a cascade of preference shifts (Zhang 2009). According to this alternative approach, legitimacy is not a single continuous variable with a mean value whose implications can be linked in a linear manner to the probability of system-threatening behavior. Rather, it is a cluster of variables whose means *and* variances can be linked in a Bayesian or "fuzzy set" manner of conditional probabilities to system-threatening behavior. The notion is that different combinations of factors with different critical values might interact to suddenly and radically alter the overall level of legitimacy, causing system-threatening events. The Falun Gong protest movement of 1999, for instance, was such a node of delegitimation, one that the party crushed with unexpected venom. The wife of former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin commented that his desk was covered in reports of behaviors that might be considered evidence of legitimacy deficits: "Explosions here, rioting there. Murders, corruption, terrorism—little that was nice" (Kuhn 2004).

The data sets used to measure legitimacy in China are both attitudinal (answers to questions about trust, support, or satisfaction with the regime and its institutions) and behavioral (tax payments, voting rates, political violence, nationalist demonstrations, etc.) (Gilley 2006). In authoritarian systems, behavioral indicators might be weighted more heavily in any overall evaluation of legitimacy given the problem of insincere answers to survey questions. In Hungary, Kadar believed that "legitimacy depended upon the voluntary participation of a majority of citizens [...] in order to stimulate a positive response on the part of the citizenry" (Toma and Völgyes 1977: 32).

In China, sky-high attitudinal indicators are offset by much lower behavioral indicators—meaning that citizens invest themselves in the state much less through their deeds than through their words. Turnouts in village and urban district direct elections and the willingness to pay income taxes both reveal only moderate legitimacy in a cross-national comparison. Gilley (Gilley 2009) refers to this phenomena as "hidden discontent" and has found that China had one of the largest gaps of the 72 countries studied. In addition, in a country the size of China one must engage in substantive geographical (which region?), institutional (which institutions?), and popular (which groups?) complexification. Gunter Schubert argues that in order to assess the Communist regime's overall legitimacy "it is first of all necessary to disaggregate the Chinese political system (or state) and look at the potential 'zones of legitimacy' at different spatial, administrative and personal levels" (Schubert 2008: 196). When one does this, one recognizes that China has both high overall legitimacy and serious legitimacy fissures, if only because of its size and complexity as a nation. If high national average

legitimacy can easily crumble in the face of a particular localized crisis, then China's size and complexity as a nation suggest the party is right to be worried about even seemingly minor threats to its legitimacy.

Wang Zhengxu, for instance, has found that the legitimacy of the "real state" with which people had actual interactions (the police, local government, cadres) was considerably lower—generally 20 to 30 percentage points—than that of the "ideal state" (the party center, the National People's Congress [NPC], etc.) with which they have no contact (Wang 2005). China's official bluebook on social development for 2005, meanwhile, found that political support among rural dwellers declined from 50 percent for the central party-state to 25 percent, 5 percent, 2 percent, and 1 percent (Yu 2005:218) for the next four levels of authority (provincial, city, county, and township). This is a reversal of the standard pattern in most countries, where legitimacy is highest for the level of government that people are closest to. This suggests that trust in the central state is more fragile and is vulnerable to being degraded by actual experiences similar to those that have cost it support at local levels (Li 2008). Indeed, the same volume noted that trust in the central state among rural dwellers who came to Beijing to petition fell from 95 percent to 39 percent after just a week of petitioning. The percentage who agreed with the statement that "the central authorities fear peasants" rose from 7 percent to 59 percent. As the author of the survey put it: "This is frightening. It means that petitioners to Beijing have become a major source of a loss of support for the central party-state" (Yu 2005).

In terms of particular subjects, specific groups such as adherents to the Falun Gong, petitioners who feel wronged by state actions, minority groups like Tibetans and Uighurs, and rights defender groups like the Beijing Lawyers Association represent significant pockets of legitimation failure. Central Party School researcher Zhu Lingjun notes that the party's expansion of its popular base has left workers feeling "suspicious" of its legitimacy (Zhu 2006).

Thus, one must begin with the duality of objectively high legitimacy at an aggregate level but an array of variances and failures at the disaggregate level. The regime acts as a regime under constant threat, and yet evidence of popular challenges to its rule is scant, at least as traditionally measured. From the complexified or Bayesian perspective, Chinese analysts see evidence of legitimacy deficits or even crisis. Of 168 articles dealing with the topic of regime legitimacy in the party-school journals, university journals, and public policy journals that we studied between 2003 and 2007, 30 percent warned of a looming legitimacy crisis (*hefaxing weiji*) for the CCP while a larger proportion (68 percent) warned about some form of legitimacy challenge or threat (*tiaozhan, weixie, wenti, ruodian*, etc.) (Gilley and Holbig 2009).

#### 4 Determining Sources of Legitimacy

How does one determine causality in the case of legitimacy? Many studies use individual-level correlational analysis that links attitudes about certain types of state or regime performance to attitudes about state or regime legitimacy through regression analysis (Wang 2005;

Shou 2007; Chen and Shi 2001). However, this strategy yields bundles of closely linked (that is, mutually constitutive) subjective attitudes but does not tell us anything about what states or regimes are objectively doing, nor about how the process that generates supportive social attitudes actually operates.

Our alternative approach is to focus on two “causal” strategies:

*One* is the factors that Chinese party strategists think are important to its legitimacy—in part because this is what explains CCP behavior but also, methodologically, because they may have insights unavailable to the outside observer about what actually does generate legitimacy. The CCP is an assiduous poller and a trenchant analyst of its own legitimacy, and thus its internal debate is a valid indicator of what actually causes its legitimacy. We might think of these subjective factors as mainly concerning legitimacy claims and strategies. The questions relevant here include the following: How is this factor perceived by relevant actors seeking to legitimate the regime? And what will determine which innovations in legitimation strategy are adopted—elite discourse, social demands, random policy innovations, exogenous shocks, or structural factors?

The *second* is then the objective and empirical analysis of these factors, relying not on individual-level correlational analysis but on macrolevel correlational analysis, where a factor can be said to be more legitimating when its objective presence is associated with objectively higher legitimacy or where its objective presence correlates with macrolevel social attitudes. We might think of this as mainly concerning the successes or failures of various legitimation strategies. The questions relevant here are as follows: How important is a certain factor as a source of legitimacy? How has it varied over time in both delivery and importance? What are the likely challenges of delivering this in future and of its future importance to the legitimation process?

#### **4.1 The Conundrum of Economic Growth**

Growth and nationalism, as mentioned, are widely cited among outside analysts as the main sources of legitimacy in China. No doubt, as the WVS question shows, they matter. But the WVS data also shows that they are probably declining in importance, and both face inherent dilemmas.

There is a view widely shared among analysts in China (e.g., Kang 1999, Xu and Yang 2005, Long and Wang 2005) that economic growth in particular, while providing a short-term fillip to party legitimacy, was, like revolutionary legitimacy, bound to be exhausted. This is because it generates its own problems (inequalities, environmental degradation, etc.); because it creates rising expectations; and because it fuels shifts in social values and political culture. Indeed, Chinese elites have worried for years about the fleeting nature of economic success, which is aggravated by the increasing dependence on the global market. Samuel Huntington’s “King’s dilemma” (Huntington 1970: 177), translated as “performance dilemma”

(*zhengji kunju*), was borrowed by Chinese scholars as the starting point for a critical analysis of the first two decades of economic reforms. These scholars argued that party rule would come under growing pressure as the satisfaction of material needs would breed immaterial ones, such as demands for political participation and pluralization, and as social inequalities fuelled a sense of injustice (Gilley and Holbig 2009).

The relationship between growth and regime legitimacy is not an obvious one. Economic growth and material well-being are highly abstract notions for the individual, notions which are usually experienced by way of intertemporal, interpersonal, interregional and international comparison. This is to say, economic success is not per se a source of regime legitimacy; instead, it has to be framed in ways conducive to positive subjective perceptions of the regime, so that the latter is seen as, for example, competent, efficient, fair, committed to the realization of the common interest while avoiding publicly manifest partiality or bias, aware of social woes and arranging for compensation of the less affluent, capable of selectively embracing the benefits of globalization while defending national interests on a complex international terrain, and so on. By the same logic, economic crises should not be regarded as an immediate threat to regime legitimacy, bringing down autocrats once the growth falls—again, the emergence of legitimacy deficits depends on how the crisis is framed by the incumbent regime.

The Chinese elites' reaction to the recent global financial and economic crisis is a striking example of the role of framing. When the financial crisis hit the US economy and started to spread across regional markets, Chinese economists initially put forward a "decoupling thesis." Supported by various international commentators, they argued that China, thanks to the leadership's earlier, wise reluctance to fully liberalize its financial market, banking system and the exchange rate regime, had maintained sound finances and would not easily fall prey to the global crisis. Scholars from the "New Left" who gloated that the collapse of Wall Street highlighted the shortcomings of American-style capitalism were well received (Zheng and Lye 2008).

When the global economic crisis eventually hit China in September 2008 via a sharp decline in Western demand for Chinese exports, the financial authorities were quick to signal their resoluteness to tackle the crisis by reducing domestic interest rates, reserve ratios, and deposit and lending rates. In the face of the damages to China's coastal export firms, surging job losses, and the ensuing risks of social instability, Wen Jiabao announced a 4 trillion yuan (USD 586 billion) stimulus package in November. This was to be spent for infrastructure projects, reconstruction work in the earthquake-hit regions of Sichuan province, technological innovation, environmental protection, and social welfare measures (Schueller 2009). Rhetorically the announcement of the stimulus package was linked to a plea for confidence—addressed to domestic as well as international audiences—to overcome the crisis of the world market, to heed against protectionism, and to stabilize the domestic market through spending on durable consumer goods at home. The fact that the package was formulated re-

sponsibly and speedily (without having to pass many procedural hurdles) earned the Chinese leadership praise from other developing and emerging countries. Also, thanks to the enormous foreign exchange reserves China had amassed, the huge sum could be earmarked without raising the country's deficit ratio to irresponsibly high levels.

Another leitmotif has been to make use of the crisis as an opportunity to address structural imbalances at home and enhance China's international standing. While most governments around the globe have availed themselves of some version of this "crisis-as-opportunity" rhetoric, the Chinese leadership has particularly emphasized the positive role of the party-state. In his work report to the NPC in March 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao brought home the party's proactive role and the "advantages" of the party regime in dealing with the economic crisis:

Our confidence and strength come from many sources: from the scientific judgment and correct grasp of the situation of the central leadership; from the policies and measures that have been formulated and implemented to respond to challenges and promote long-term development; [...] from our unique political and institutional advantages that enable us to mobilize resources to accomplish large undertakings, the stable, harmonious social environment we enjoy, and the enthusiasm and creativity of the whole nation from top to bottom to promote scientific development; and from the powerful spirit of the Chinese nation, which always works hard and persistently to make the country strong.

(Xinhua English translation service, 14.3.2009)

Thus, the CCP is aware of both the fleeting and the subjective nature of growth-based legitimation and constantly has to struggle to maintain this source of legitimacy. Not unsurprisingly, it has devoted major efforts to the search for alternative legitimacy sources.

#### **4.2 The Double-edged Sword of Nationalism**

Nationalism also involves inherent dilemmas. Since the 1990s, anti-Western and anti-Japanese outbursts have occurred repeatedly in the streets of Chinese cities and in the limelight of international media coverage. In the field of Chinese studies, scholars have put down this phenomenon to the growing disenchantment with the West in the wake of the Soviet collapse. They have discussed how much of this nationalist sentiment is state-sponsored (rooted in the official cultivation of patriotism and national sovereignty instrumentalized by the Chinese party-state as an "ersatz ideology") and how much is popular nationalism (resulting from, among other factors, the uncertainties produced by the pluralization and marketization of social life, ruptures in the process of socialization and the building of personal identities, mounting pressures in the fields of education and employment, and the ensuing sensibility towards nationalistic myths). Most authors agree that present-day nationalism is a complex

mixture of both state and popular nationalism, where mechanisms of top-down and bottom-up mobilization are closely interrelated (Barmé 1995, Unger 1996, Gries 2004, Zhao 2004, Link 2008, Wang 2008).

Over decades, the CCP has implanted nationalistic myths in the collective memory which are easily mobilized in periods of external ruptures. The official narrative of the Chinese nation as a “victim” weaves the imperialist aggression of Western powers in the nineteenth century, the cruelties inflicted upon China by Japanese “devils” during the Sino-Japanese war, the chauvinism of a “relentless” post-war Japan, and the condescension of Western countries vis-à-vis China’s emerging economic and political power into an endless chain of “humiliations” (He 2007). As Edward Friedman has argued most trenchantly, in order to safeguard its continued legitimation, the CCP decided in the early 1980s to “cover up” the crimes of the Maoist era, including those of the Cultural Revolution, which involved large portions of the populace not only as victims but also—due to the widespread phenomenon of popular vigilantism—as aggressors. This official strategy of “misremembering the past” has resulted in sublimated forms of an aggressive nationalism and a latent desire for revenge which might flare up even on minor occasions (Friedman 2008). Callahan has argued that intellectuals and party workers in China have attributed an imagined “China Threat Theory” to the West in order to consolidate nationalist identity (Callahan 2006).

Due to this complex interplay of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms of mobilization, the leveraging of nationalism as a source of regime legitimacy is an inherently problematic strategy. The Chinese leadership is well aware of this; at least, one hears explicit warnings of the dangers of nationalism from party theorists and prominent scholars. Wan Jun from the Central Party School, for example, regards the resort to nationalism in China as a double-edged sword. While nationalist sentiments may hold positive potential for social mobilization, which could be instrumentalized to overcome a social crisis, they can easily grow out of control and cause a destructive mentality of aggression. Particularly in a multiethnic state such as China, nationalist aspirations may not enhance social cohesion but rather subvert China’s fragile national unity. “As we urgently need to throw ourselves into the waves of world-wide economic globalization, we cannot do without the legitimation strategy of nationalism, but we should not use it in a rash manner, and always be very prudent and careful when applying it” (Wan 2003). Chinese experts on international politics argue that the repeated outbursts of nationalist sentiment in recent years have severely reduced the room to maneuver in China’s diplomacy, a factor that has substantially increased the uncertainties of foreign policy making under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

The problematic nature of nationalist strategies of legitimation can be explained by looking at the ambivalent implications of the claim to national sovereignty, which has formed an integral element of political legitimation in all modern nation-states. According to David Beetham, the claim to national sovereignty substantiates the constitutional rules and normatively validates the political power in a given nation-state by justifying the rightful source of

authority. As such, national sovereignty contains a “characteristic dilemma”: on the one hand, it is a *sine qua non* condition of political power—in the words of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, “the nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty” (1789 version)—but on the other hand, it makes the nation-state inherently vulnerable to external interference by other states, nonstate actors, and international agencies as well as to competing domestic interpretations of national sovereignty by marginalized ethnic groups within the boundaries of the respective nation-states (Beetham 1991: 121-135). The construction of the People’s Republic of China as a multiethnic nation-state, with all its contested national identities and territorial disputes, is a most illuminating example of the disruptive character inherent in the claim to national sovereignty as a source of legitimation.

Indeed, as the waves of nationalist ire against the US, Japan, and Western Europe mentioned above have shown, the Chinese government’s vulnerability to external and internal interference has been growing over the past decade (Jia 2005). All instances of surging popular nationalism were triggered by unforeseeable acts on the part of foreign politicians (Japanese premiers visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, Merkel and Sarkozy shaking hands with the Dalai Lama); by incidents involving foreign military actors (Belgrade bombing, US reconnaissance plane); or unfavorable, “biased” coverage of China by international media outlets (the CNN and NTV coverage of the events in spring 2008). Overseas Chinese living in the West and with direct access to US and European media played an unprecedented role in 2008 as patriotic “interpreters” of the alleged anti-Chinese publicity found in these countries. In Chinese-, English- and German-language online blogs and letters to the editor they professed how the biased coverage of the “Tibetan riots” and the Olympic torch relay had shattered their former belief in the truthfulness and objectiveness of Western media. Instead, the events had illustrated the much higher credibility of the Chinese press and the integrity of the Chinese leadership, which proved its high moral standards in the wake of the ensuing Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 and filled them with national pride (Edney 2008). While these statements confirm the positive role of nationalism in bolstering the legitimacy of the Chinese party-state, the involvement of overseas Chinese represents a highly volatile element which could easily turn against the same regime under different conditions.

The interplay between state nationalism and popular nationalism, between top-down and bottom-up mechanisms of mobilization, has been further complicated in the past few years by the increasingly prominent role played by the so-called New Left in China. The catch-all label is used to designate social scientists with rediscovered socialist or social-democratic visions, conservative Marxists, and a broad group of publicists with populist airs. While they usually refuse to be lumped together in the New Left category, what they share is a deep resentment of all forms of (neo)liberalism. Despite the heterogeneity of this group, it has become possible over the past few years to identify the New Left as a hotbed of increasingly self-assured, if not aggressive, forms of elite-sponsored nationalism. Pro-establishment social science scholars, such as Professor Hu Angang, founder of the Research Centre for

China Studies [Zhongguo guoqing yanjiu zhongxin] at Qinghua University and advisor to the CCP leadership, while acknowledging the growth in social contradictions during the reform period, have been propagating considerable national pride and prowess by extolling the miraculous development of China's "comprehensive national strength" and projecting the "steep rise of a great power" [daguo jueqi]<sup>3</sup> whose economic development will climb to ever new heights (e.g., Hu 2006, Men 2006).

Compared to this moderate economic nationalism, other social scientists have become quite outspoken in their criticism of what they regard as the hegemony of "Western" values, concepts, and institutions: democracy, human rights, the free-market theories, the Washington Consensus, etc. In the wake of the 2008 events, various prominent scholars started to publicly question the universality of the "universal values" proclaimed by the West. Chen Kuiyuan, president of the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pondered in July 2008 that Chinese scholars had in the past followed the so-called universal values blindly, and that it was time to rethink this orientation.<sup>4</sup> In September 2008, People's University professor Zhou Xincheng stated in the *Guangming Daily*, the official newspaper addressing intellectual and cultural circles, that "what some people call 'universal values' are in fact Western values" (Zhou 2008).

While these pro-establishment figures have clothed their criticism in rather vague and sweeping language and have avoided naming specific persons or countries, the authors of a recent national bestseller published in March 2009 with the title *Unhappy China. The Great Time, Grand Vision and Our [Domestic and External] Challenges* cross the limits of political correctness by naming names throughout (probably one reason for the book becoming a bestseller). The book presents a collection of essays from five social scientists and journalists (among them Song Qiang, co-author of the 1996 bestseller *China Can Say No*) who, in response to international criticisms of China in 2008, rage against foreign adversaries such as the US and its allies, particularly Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel. First and foremost, however, the authors lash out against their compatriots, namely, many self-appointed "elites" who are accused of lacking confidence in their country and betraying China's national interests. "Political elites, government economists, cultural elites, editors-in-chief and even some military chiefs" — all seen as being under the influence of the mainstream (neo)liberal school of thought — are charged with holding the mistaken belief that "the West would care for and reward China if it humbly accept[ed] the world's criticisms" and therefore of employing a soft approach towards the US and Western Europe (Song Qiang 2009). Prominent Chinese intellectuals and writers with liberal outlooks or a Western educational background, among

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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese term used in this context is *jueqi*, the same term as in the international relations slogan "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*), which was abolished in 2004, a year after its formulation in 2003, due to its connotations of an aggressive drive for hegemony.

<sup>4</sup> His July 2008 comments subsequently appeared in the September 2, 2008 issue of the newsletter of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. See <http://chinausnews.com/html/46/n-1046.html>.

others, and the *Southern Weekend Daily* and other publications of the Nanfang Media Group, which have been cited widely in international media as pioneers of a liberal, progressive investigative journalism inside China in recent years, are derided as naïve lackeys of Western and “universal values.” The “grand vision” which the book outlines instead is that “with Chinese national strength growing at an unprecedented rate, China should stop debasing itself, recognize the fact that it has the power to lead the world and break away from Western influence” (Song Xiaojun et al. 2009).

As the above rhetoric reveals, this “New Left” nationalism caters to a chauvinistic and increasingly vengeful nationalism among parts China’s urban youth while at the same time formulating trenchant criticisms of the political, intellectual and business elites, who are accused of corruption; egotism; technocratic arrogance; moral decay; and, most viciously, of being blackguards (*zei*) betraying their country’s national interests. Thus, it’s not only liberal intellectuals who come under attack but also the “establishment” at large.

### 4.3 The End of the “End of Ideology”

The underlying question of legitimacy is where the common expectations, or evaluative norms, by which legitimacy is judged come from. Since social norms are plural and contested, how do certain ones emerge as dominant? What are the norms that create the sense of political community, the expectations of political culture, and the basis of performance evaluations?

In authoritarian systems, the solution to the problem of normative pluralism is ideology. In communist party regimes, Beetham argues, ideology has to provide the normative foundation for the rightful source of political authority; to define the performance criteria of government, particularly the “common interest” of society and how this goal should be pursued; and to serve as a stimulus to mobilize popular consent or, at least, the assent of political and social elites relevant to legitimizing state power (Beetham 1991, 2001).

Contrary to the proposition of an “end of ideology” which allegedly paralleled the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing “end of history”, the CCP has never discontinued its reliance on ideology as a crucial source of regime legitimacy (Chen 1995). The alleged “pragmatism” of Deng Xiaoping has been less about an abandonment of ideology than about its constant renovation. Party theorists have clearly acknowledged the challenges to socialist ideology resulting from the reform period: the fading memories of the revolution; the discrediting experiences of Maoism; the decay of Soviet communism; economic globalization; the import of Western culture, technology and the Internet; etc. (e.g., Sun and Sun 2003; cf. also Gilley and Holbig 2009). However, the answer to these challenges has been to refurbish the old-fashioned image of Marxism and breathe new life into worn-out socialist tenets.

Heeding the words of Deng Xiaoping, who, after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, reflected that “our biggest mistake was in the area of education, in particular ideological and political education” (Deng 1989), his successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have invested

much conceptual energy and large sums of money in modernizing the party's ideology. Faced with the loss of power of Taiwan's ruling KMT in early 2000, the party leadership under Jiang Zemin came forward with an explicit strategy to adapt its dominant ideology to a changing environment. Jiang Zemin's controversial "Three Represents"<sup>5</sup> concept signaled that the CCP was about to redefine its formerly proletarian social base and cast its lot with the newly affluent segments of society (Lewis and Xue 2003).

At the same time, the concept was advertised as the core of an ideological reconstruction of the CCP's legitimacy as ruling party. The right to rule was not claimed any longer with reference to the CCP's long revolutionary history and socialist dogmas, but instead by emphasizing the innovativeness of party theory and the vitality of the CCP, which resulted from its ability to reform itself from within (Schubert 2008, Holbig 2009). Despite strong resistance from inside and outside the CCP which denounced the Three Represents—particularly the official invitation of private entrepreneurs into the Communist Party—as “muddle-headed,” as betraying the party's nature as vanguard of the working class, and even as “capitalist fascist dictatorship” (Kuang 2002), the formula entered the party constitution in November 2002 as a legacy of the retiring CCP general secretary and the most recent manifestation of the party's innovative spirit.

When Hu Jintao took over from Jiang Zemin as party chief in late 2002, he faced the daunting challenge of putting an end to the ideological controversies surrounding the Three Represents. Besides announcing a temporary ban on discussions of the issue in the media, in party organizations, and in academic circles in summer 2003 (Heilmann et al. 2004), he engineered a subtle reinterpretation of the formula's elitist connotations. Instead of emphasizing the Three Represents' first element, namely, the “representation of the development of the advanced social productive forces”, which had been stressed under Jiang Zemin, official discourse now emphasized the third element, the “representation of the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people” (cf. compare Lu 2000, Yue 2003). The essence of the Three Represents was now interpreted in official discourse as “establishing a party that is devoted to the public interest and governing for the people” (*Renmin Ribao*, 2.7.2003).

Upholding this claim of innovativeness, Hu Jintao (and his advisors) came forward with two, more theoretical, concepts of his own. The first was the “Scientific Outlook on Development,” introduced in early 2004 as a grand strategy of “comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development.”<sup>6</sup> With this concept, the new leadership distanced itself from

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<sup>5</sup> The precise definition of the Three Represents [san ge daibiao] formula is “the importance of the communist party in modernizing the nation—representing the demands for the development of advanced social productive forces, the direction of advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people” (Lu 2000; for a detailed analysis of the concept cf. Holbig 2008)

<sup>6</sup> The earliest public mention of the concept, then still without the attribute “scientific,” occurred in October 2003 (cf. *Renmin Ribao*, 1.10., 30.11.03). In January 2004 a full-fledged version of the Scientific Outlook on Development was introduced to the public (cf. *Renmin Ribao*, 12.1.04, 22.2.04, 22.3.04).

the growth-only mentality of the first two decades of economic reforms and instead promised to balance economic development with social and ecological aspects.

This concept was followed closely by another, the “Harmonious Socialist Society”, which was innovative in explicitly acknowledging the existence of social tensions and claiming to tackle their root causes, increasingly perceived as a risk to social stability and to the political legitimacy of CCP rule. Hu stated that a “Harmonious Socialist Society” was “essential for consolidating the party's social foundation to govern and achieving the party's historical governing mission” (*Renmin Ribao*, 27.06.2005).

Moving beyond mere rhetoric, the CCP under Hu Jintao invested heavily in political campaigns and scholarly ventures. The most well-known and costly was probably the campaign to “preserve the party's progressive nature” launched in early 2005, in fact the broadest and most systematic inner-party education campaign since the start of economic reforms. In the course of 18 months, all 70 million party members were supposed to prove their loyal commitment to the party's cause by informing themselves of the most recent developments of “Sinicized Marxism” and socialist party theory (*Renmin Ribao*, 10., 15., 21.1. 2005). Another example is the new Academy of Marxism, which was founded in late 2005 under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In order to fulfill its mission—defined as the theoretical innovation of Marxism and the compilation of new Marxist textbooks catering to the tastes of younger generations—the academy was given hundreds of millions of RMB (*Xinhua News Agency*, 26.12.05).

Our analysis of approximately 200 articles published in party-school organs and scholarly journals between 2003 and 2008 has revealed that the majority of authors dwelt on the important role of ideological adaptation and innovation, which were seen as the prerequisite for relegitimizing party-rule ideology (Gilley and Holbig 2009). Lu Ailin of Henan's Zhongyuan Industrial College, one of the most prolific writers in contemporary China on party legitimacy, views ideology as the “key factor for public identification with the political authority” (Lu 2005, 2006). Ideology is ascribed numerous positive functions, such as interpreting political order, cementing national identity, mobilizing support, and reducing economic transaction costs by enhancing social trust (Li 2005). A 2008 article in the journal *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth], the CCP's top party-theory organ, argued that in China as elsewhere ideology serves as a cohesive force and the “political soul” of parties, being the main instrument for mobilizing support and active commitment to the party's cause. In contrast to past periods of “ideological frenzy”, the authors reflect, Chinese people today are no longer assessing their political leaders according to the party's program and principles, but rather according to its capacity and efficiency in solving real social problems. Socialist ideology should not be regarded as signaling only a remote ideal, but as a practical means to satisfy people's actual needs under the conditions of social transformation. The real challenge posed to socialist ideology is the increasing social injustice, which could lead to an identity crisis or even to a legitimacy

crisis in China. Therefore, if the party wants to maintain its ideology-based legitimacy, it has to take stringent measures to restore social justice and harmony (Nie and Hu 2008).

In today's China, efforts to mobilize ideological commitment are focused on political elites, particularly on Communist Party cadres who form the rank and file of the administrative staff at all levels of the party, state and military hierarchies. The ideological commitment of these elites can be used as a test of political loyalty vis-à-vis the regime and publicized as representing the consent of the whole populace based on doctrines of the Communist Party as "vanguard" of the masses.

However popular consent is framed, the multiple tasks that official ideology has to shoulder create an ongoing need for ideological adaptation and reform in order to sustain an "ideological hegemony" (Sun 1995: 16), which in turn contributes to political and social stability. At the same time, the need for continuous innovation causes a vulnerability particular to socialist systems. Compared to other authoritarian regime types, they are much more easily thrown out of balance once reforms extend beyond the Communist grand tradition and the ruling ideology is unraveled (Gore 2003). The debate among Chinese party theorists and scholars confirms the precarious role of ideological reform as the Achilles' heel of regime legitimacy, allowing us, in turn, to understand the continuous and enormous investments made by the CCP leadership in order to constantly adapt its ideology to a changing domestic and international environment (Holbig 2009).

#### 4.4 Culture and its Competing Reinventions

The US scholar Sun Yan argues in her study *The Chinese Reassessment of Socialism, 1976–1992* that ideology in China has important nationalist and culturalist underpinnings. In the words of Sun,

the Chinese concern for ideological and conceptual adaptation is related to the national search for identity and resurrection that has faced the nation since its confrontation with the West in the last century. Not incidentally, the reconceptualization of socialism is frequently linked with the question of "cultural reconstruction"—the reconstruction of Chinese cultural values—in academic and political discussions.

(Sun 1995: 18)

Culturalism can be identified as an alternative strategy to legitimize party rule in China that has gained increasing currency over the past decade. While the reference here is not the claim to national sovereignty but the claim to represent the legacy of the cultural tradition(s) of society and, with it, its cultural identity, nationalism and culturalism bear a strong structural similarity in that they are subject to a complex interplay between bottom-up and top-down mechanisms of mobilization. Parallel to the party-state's strategic ambiguity towards nationalist aspirations, we find quite ambivalent attitudes on the part of the CCP leadership

towards the revival of numerous traditional elements of “Chinese culture” that could be observed in the reform period. The renaissance of Confucianism is a most illustrative case in point. John Makeham, who in his recent book analyzed the philosophy’s role in contemporary academic discourse, may be right that “the widely held view that the promotion of Confucianism in contemporary China is orchestrated by the Party-state and its functionaries is untenable” (Makeham 2008:7). Indeed, the renewed interest in Confucianism since the early 1980s seems to have originated in various quarters of society without evident initiative on the part of (though with the silent toleration of) the central and local authorities. However, we find that starting in 1986 the party-state reacted to these bottom-up initiatives by attempting to regain at least discursive hegemony over what seems to have been perceived as an increasingly uncontrolled proliferation of “low culture” and “high culture” interpretations of Confucianism and to reframe them in ways compatible with the CCP’s claims to legitimate rule.

Within only a few years after the end of Cultural Revolution’s iconoclastic campaigns, various Chinese folk traditions, among them Buddhism, Daoism (and its numerous Qigong and Wushu applications), and Confucianism, enjoyed an impressive revival. Particularly in coastal areas with kinship links to overseas Chinese communities and/or with high concentrations of the newly affluent who had benefited first from the economic reforms, temples were rebuilt, fairs revived, religious rituals and practices of ancestor worship reinstitutionalized, and new adepts recruited. Through intensive fieldwork, Sébastien Billioud and his colleagues have unearthed numerous nonofficial manifestations of Confucianism in contemporary China. As they illustrate in detail, Confucian traditions have come to play a growing role in fields such as religion, spirituality, moral self-cultivation, philosophy, (pseudo-)science, children’s education, etc. (Billioud 2007, Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2008). Courses for Confucian self-cultivation through classical Chinese music are offered to children and university students (Zhe 2008). While most of these applications belong to a merely private realm, various local initiatives to organize classes and compile new textbooks based on the *Sanzijing* and other Confucian classics for use in children’s preschool and primary school education border on responsibilities that have belonged to official institutions in the decades since 1949 (Billioud and Thoraval 2007).

The most challenging interpretations of Confucianism, however, can be found in academic discourse. As early as 1984, liberal scholars based at the prestigious Beijing University, such as Feng Youlan and Zhang Dainian, founded a nongovernmental academic organization called the Chinese Culture College. During frequent, open—and officially tolerated—lectures and seminars during the second half of the 1980s, eminent mainland scholars such as Liang Shuming and overseas Chinese scholars such as Tu Wei-ming and Cheng Chung-ying were invited to exchange views about Chinese and Western culture. While few of these liberal Confucianists propagated the introduction of Western-style democracy, their aim in studying Confucianism was “to initiate a peaceful political transition in order to promote political transparency within China” (Ai 2008).

It was at this juncture that the party-state leadership felt the need to react and to recapture lost ground in academic discourse. In March 1986 the State Education Commission organized a meeting during which Fang Keli, professor of philosophy at Tianjin's Nankai University, joined in the calls for a revival of Confucianism in contemporary China—at least of those elements of “New Confucianism” that were compatible with the project of modernization. Starting that year, and continuing well into the 1990s, Fang Keli was put in charge of various government-funded academic projects on New Confucianism which produced dozens of books and several hundred academic papers (Ai 2008). The aim of this official interpretation of Confucianism was to enrich Marxism by drawing on the essence of traditional doctrines. In Fang's words, Confucianism should be studied and modified “under the stances, principles, and methodologies of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought” (Fang 1991). The traditional elements of Confucianism most appealing to this tailor-made socialist Confucianism were the love of social order and stability, the acceptance of hierarchy, devotion to the family and the state, etc. These values—which are apparently the most qualified to support the legitimation of authoritarian rule—resonate with traditional cultural values that are still rooted very deeply in the political cultures and societies of both mainland China and Taiwan (Shi 2001).

The battle for discursive hegemony had not been won, however. Starting in 1989, and with increasing vigor over the 1990s and 2000s, a third interpretation of Confucianism was established, spearheaded by prominent scholars such as Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang. These “Confucians” (*rujia*), who claimed to represent the true essence of traditional Confucianism, plead for the rediscovery of the Confucian values of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, sincerity, harmony, loyalty and filial piety as a programmatic alternative to Marxist ideology, which they regarded not only as alien to China but also as standing in the way of the realization of the great nation's historical mission. Jiang Qing explicitly demanded the development of a “political or ideological Confucianism” to replace Marxism as the orthodox ideology representing Chinese culture (Jiang 1989); more recently, he even suggested that efforts should be made to “Confucianize the CCP” and to “peacefully transform the CCP through Confucianism” (*ibid.*; Fang and Luo 2007; cf. Ai 2008). According to Kang Xiaoguang, Chinese people had “the right to be ruled properly” by a ruling class elected by “Confucians with virtue”; he advocated establishing a “Confucian authoritarian regime” as an alternative to the present Communist Party regime—or as realization of its better self (Kang 2005, 2007). As this vocabulary reveals, the legitimacy of the CCP's authoritarian rule came under subtle assault from visions of another authoritarian utopia formulated by Confucians of modern times.

Faced with the ongoing challenge of competing interpretations of Confucianism, the new party leadership under Hu Jintao appears to have decided to draw back from this academic battle and to tame this contested element of tradition by including it in the large melt-

ing pot of “traditional Chinese culture.”<sup>7</sup> While official slogans such as the goal of creating a “well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui*) or “social harmony” (*shehui hexie*) bear some vague connection to Confucian notions, these notions are reduced to sterile clichés representing an amorphous imaginaire of historical achievements and future greatness that is referred to as Chinese culture. The opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games, with its impressive kaleidoscope of China’s “four great inventions” (fireworks, paper, print, and the compass), highlights from the fine arts and skills of imperial times (terracotta warriors, martial arts, calligraphy, Guqin music, Peking Opera, etc.), demonstrations of technological prowess (spacecraft, astronauts, the 3D dramaturgy of engineering skills in the bird’s nest), plus of course the symbols of national sovereignty (the unity of China’s 55 ethnic groups, the Great Wall, hymns, flags, etc.), represented an ideal-type manifestation of this reconstructed ensemble of Chinese cultural identity (Opening Ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games, CCTV 1, 08.08.2008). While the Communist Revolution and the subsequent eras of party rule were not part of the show, the honor of hosting the sports mega-event clearly bolstered the party-state’s claim to represent the cultural identity of the Chinese nation.

The growing presence over recent years of symbols, images, and artifacts reminiscent of traditional Chinese culture in public and private life—architecture, fashion wear, lifestyle accessories, leisure time activities, and the use of arbitrary symbols of “Chineseness” (landscapes, Buddhism, martial arts, traditional wedding and New Year’s ceremonies, lanterns, etc.) as a “brand” of their own in the advertisement industry (Frisch 2009)—bear testimony to the wide resonance of culturalism in present-day China, which the party leadership has learned to tap as another source of regime legitimacy. The empirical evidence is also compelling: Shi Tianjian argues that the “traditional values of hierarchy and collectivism [have] contributed to generating diffuse support in China.”

#### 4.5 Walking the Tightrope of Democracy and Governance

In our analysis of party debate between 2003 and 2007, we have found that one cluster of seven prescriptive variables, which we labeled “institutions”, accounted for 21 percent of the variations across the 26 prescriptive variables. Chinese party analysts and scholars take the institutionalization of the regime seriously as a legitimation strategy.

Four of the factors—bureaucratic efficiency, the empowerment of people’s congresses, the rule of law, and inner-party democracy—fall within the normal understanding of institutionalization. These reflect the normal concepts of “rational-legal” legitimation as understood

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<sup>7</sup> The 2005 campaign to establish 100 Confucius Institutes around the world (later increased to 200 and now numbering approximately 300) did not contradict this trend but rather confirmed it. Under the “banner” of Confucius, the institute’s mission is defined very broadly as spreading the knowledge of Chinese language and culture, while no particular efforts are made by the Confucius Institutes Headquarters in Beijing to promote activities related to Confucianism or the Confucian classics as such.

by Weber or Huntington. Institutionalization here means the development of more autonomous, specialized, capacity-rich, and noncorrupt institutions for the formulation and implementation of public policy.

However, three other factors included in the institutionalist cluster—the incorporation of new social groups, consultative democracy, and electoral democracy—concern popular input. The concept of “democracy” has been appropriated by the party as a strategy of institutionalization, and the propaganda strategy of using the term “Western-style democracy”, as distinguished from “normal democracy”, is intended to pave the way for this strategy to succeed. In addition to the well-known and widely established semicompetitive elections at the village level, Zhu Lingjun also describes a variety of direct-election experiments on the part of people’s congresses, leadership committees, and the leaders of both government and party at the township and county (or district and city) levels that are expected to uphold legitimacy. Furthermore, the party is experimenting with consultative and deliberative forums where civic leaders, social groups, and commoners are invited to help formulate public policies (Zhu 2006: ch. 8). All this is seen by the party as a key source of future legitimacy because it is a way to ensure that the CCP responds to growing social complexity and value shifts. Of course, democracy is not alien to the CCP’s traditional quest for legitimacy; on the contrary, the claim to popular sovereignty has always been one of the two pillars of the CCP’s justification of its authority, the other pillar being the scientific doctrine of Leninism.

According to Maria Markus (1982), it is precisely this combination of bottom-up (“democratic”) and top-down (Leninist) legitimacy doctrines which accomplishes the “legitimation of a hierarchically downwards-oriented system of power and command in the name of a ‘real’ popular sovereignty” (Markus 1982: 84). Thus, debating democracy in China always means walking the tightrope between socialist and other, competing (liberal, social-democratic, Confucian, etc.) claims to the correct interpretation of the principle of popular sovereignty (cf. Holbig 2009). The contested nature of direct township elections in China—where bottom-up democratic urges compete with top-down Leninist and legalistic ones—nicely reflects the tensions inherent in the CCP’s embrace of the word “democracy.” When Honghe Prefecture in Yunnan Province held 10 direct township elections in 2004, an intense internal and multilevel debate erupted. It continued for more than a year, until Beijing finally forced the prefecture to replace the winners with appointees.<sup>8</sup>

Objectively, institutionalization has increasingly been seen by scholars as a source of legitimacy for the CCP (Yang 2004; Nathan 2003). Indeed, China tends to be relatively well-governed for a country of its income level according to World Bank Institute governance indicators data. In linking democracy to the substantive outcome of popularly perceived good governance, rather than to procedural guarantees, Beijing has reclaimed democracy for its own. As Shi Tianjin (forthcoming) notes, “the regime has been able to define democracy in its

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<sup>8</sup> Based on fieldwork by Gilley in Yunnan Province, 2007.

own terms, drawing on ideas of good government with deep roots in the nation's historical culture and more recent roots in its ideology of socialism."

Do these institutional tactics actually work? Shue (2004) believes that the maintenance of stability and efficient rule has kept the party in power since 1989. One way to keep values focused on governance and stability is to highlight the threats to these things. This is thus the reason the party has been so unexpectedly candid about the rising number of mass protests in recent years or about serious environmental and demographic (aging, sex ratios) problems: to stress the threat of chaos.

There is no doubt that in terms of within-country cases, those places where governance has worsened have experienced greater legitimacy deficits. The legitimacy of the police, for instance, has recovered from its 1990s nadir through professionalization and proceduralization. The more institutionalized local governments, party branches, NGOs (or, more often, government-organized nongovernmental organizations [GONGOs]), media outlets, and non-communist parties are, the better local governance delivery is, both because the resulting policies and services are better attuned to local demands and because they are better able to meet these demands. Civil society, when it is part of a well-institutionalized and ideologically adaptive state, can support authoritarian rule.

Problems arise, then, when the state suffers a governance-based performance failure. While its response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was generally applauded in China, the death of perhaps 10,000 school children in the disaster as a result of the collapse of schools and school dormitories has created a genuine social movement, and a pocket of legitimacy crisis. Corruption is another good example. A scathing report on corruption in China issued by the OECD in 2005 (OECD 2005) warned that the party's legitimacy was threatened, particularly by the widespread skimming of funds at levels that amounted to several percentage points of GDP per year. The report has subsequently disappeared from the OECD's list of publications. In a Hunan Organization Department survey of 200 cadres in 2001, corruption was cited as second only to underdevelopment as a source of legitimacy problems (Zhu 2006:312). This is a reminder that subjective perceptions of corruption (fuelled by both personal experiences as well as information about objective levels from sources such as the OECD) matter most of all. Corruption has its own indirect corrosive influences on legitimacy by undermining capacity and effectiveness. But its direct impact on legitimacy only occurs if it becomes known and disliked. Beetham(1991) argues that corruption causes legitimacy deficits when it is publicly perceived as clearly favoring particular social groups and thus going against the "common interest."

As for elections, there is considerable debate concerning the legitimating effects of electoral participation in China. China's scholars and party-school researchers express a great deal of interest in the potential of "orderly" political participation as an untapped source of legitimacy (Xia 2008). Indeed, as previously mentioned, voluntary political participation should be seen as part of the *definition* of consent-legitimacy itself. Yet turnout rates for vil-

lage and urban elections (typically in the 50–70 percent range) are below the 90-percent-plus rates typically seen as necessary for evidence of mass support in authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the attitudinal side-benefits that elections might be expected to generate are unclear. One official survey found that 59 percent of urban residents believed that the direct election of residential committees (the same level as villages) was “a mere formality or a sham” (Wang 2002: 169).

Some outside scholars such as Birney and Kennedy argue that village elections have indeed legitimated the local state in China, but only where the elimination of township interference in the procedures has given them a genuine procedural validity (Kennedy 2009). In other words, where “democracy” actually legitimates, it is not the “orderly” democracy managed by top-down Leninist institutions that seeks to govern according to popular wishes but rather the “disorderly” bottom-up democracy in which procedural matters are key. By contrast, Schubert, echoing Wang Shaoguang’s argument about democracy as the alignment with popular preferences, argues that it is not the narrow procedural criteria of elections but a broader set of criteria including accountability, value congruence, and political interest through which China’s citizens judge (and thus legitimate) their “democracy” (Schubert 2009).

The CCP would like to think that it can continue to depend on institutionalization in the future, even as incomes and expectations rise; Singapore is the oft-cited model, but “bureaucratic-authoritarian” Latin America is perhaps a better analogy. Those models show that more efficient, professional, transparent, and consultative institutions alongside effective governance can satisfy demands for voice and participation for a considerable time, consistent with neo-modernization theory. Indeed, China’s value trajectory in the Inglehart/Welzel studies shows an unusually high emphasis on rational-legal rule and an unusually low emphasis on individual empowerment for a country of its income level (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Finally, it is worth mentioning explicit “liberal” strategies of legitimation. These are rare. Notions of human rights, civil society, the separation of party and government functions, and multiparty democracy remain marginal or even inimical to the CCP’s overall plans. The party issued a National Human Rights Action Plan in 2009, but human rights generally remain marginal to the party’s self-identity. Perhaps more importantly, the party has never quite succeeded in wholly eliminating the liberal perspective from Chinese politics—a perspective born during the reform era in the 1979 Democracy Wall and 1989 Tiananmen movements and recently relaunched as a movement of 300-plus intellectuals, who call themselves the Charter 08 movement (in imitation of Czechoslovakia’s Charter 77 group), demanding democratic constitutional change. Mass values may be a long way from liberal norms, but the critical views of liberal dissidents and intellectuals offer a constant challenge to the party’s illiberal strategy.

## 5 Conclusion

Compared to most regimes in the Asian region, the macro-indicators of regime legitimacy in China suggest relatively strong overall legitimacy, even if alternative measurement approaches—based on either alternative causal functional forms or on behavioral data—offer reasons to think that legitimacy is more fragile. Potential challenges to regime legitimacy at the disaggregate level abound, as flocks of petitioners remonstrating against corruption, environmental and labor scandals, mass protests against CCP rule in Tibet in 2008 and in Xinjiang in 2009, and the silenced signatories of the Charter 08 have reminded us. On the other hand, there is much evidence of an unusually agile, responsive, and creative effort by the party to maintain its legitimacy through economic performance; nationalism; ideology; culture; governance; and democracy, as defined in terms of popular sovereignty under the leadership of the party. Yet these sources of legitimacy are vulnerable in varying ways. Economic performance could fail; nationalist indignations could erupt; and a more liberal interpretation of democracy could gain sway. Yet ideology, culture, and governance are more durable. The international dimension, which could only be touched upon in this paper, adds to the complexity of the domestic picture. External perceptions of the Chinese party regime oscillate between seeing it as a self-righteous and systematic violator of citizen's rights and a role model for developing countries.

Scholars thus approach the question of legitimacy in contemporary China with much trepidation. They want to avoid a teleology of inevitable democratization, but seek also to avoid the equal and opposite teleology of an inevitable authoritarian durability. While legitimization challenges and failures exist, the CCP has so far overcome them. The issue for analysts is to develop predictive models that can identify *ex ante* when this is no longer true. In pursuing this goal, we are drawn into the dynamics of CCP survival and are constantly forced to ask questions about social change and state adaptation. Using the lens of legitimacy allows us to focus on all the important issues of contemporary Chinese politics.

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