

“THE LIMITS OF AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE”

Richard Baum
University of California, Los Angeles

Almost 40 years ago, Samuel Huntington noted that the process of socio-economic modernization was inherently politically destabilizing, and that rapid modernization was more stressful and destabilizing still. In Huntington’s famous formulation, accelerated socio-economic change served to raise popular expectations faster than existing political institutions could satisfy them, thereby spawning a “frustration gap” that fueled rising political discontent.¹

In Huntington’s view, the key to dealing effectively with the profound transitional stresses of rapid modernization was to promote effective long-term *political institutionalization* while maintaining strong, centralized *political authority*. As he famously put it, in political development the *degree* of government matters more than the *form* of government. And he went so far as to suggest that charismatic/authoritarian political regimes could provide a degree of transitional political stability necessary to guide a rapidly modernizing society through the traumas of socio-economic change.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), chapter 1 *et passim*.



Eventually, under the selection pressures of modernity, democratic institutions would display superior capacity to adapt and respond to emergent, pluralistic social forces; but in the meantime, strong central authority was the *sine qua non* of political order.²

China's post-Mao leaders have seemingly taken Huntington's theory to heart.³ Seeking to avoid the notional chaos of democratic pluralism in an age of increasing socio-economic complexity and pluralism, they have stressed "unity and stability" above all else. When faced (as in the spring of 1989) with a stark choice between political reform and political repression, they unflinchingly opted for the latter.

Yet for Huntington, the comparative advantage conferred by strong authoritarian governance was short-lived and transitive in nature; over the long haul, political power had to be institutionalized to be effective. And therein lay a profound dilemma for China's post-Mao leaders: How to create more effective, responsive political institutions without relinquishing their Leninist monopoly of political power.

The Rise of Chinese Administrative Reform

Beset by the intensifying societal frustrations and pressures of modernization, and increasingly mindful of the need to bolster the Communist party-state's "governing capacity" (*zhizheng nengli*), Chinese leaders in recent years have adopted a variety of administrative measures designed to gradually expand the mechanisms of societal *inclusion*, *consultation*, and *cooptation*, without at the same time enlarging the scope of political *accountability*, *responsibility*, or popular *empowerment*. Such measures have included, *inter alia*:

- Enlarging the deliberative function of people's congresses at all levels;
- Expanding the advisory and consultative roles of "united front" organs such as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the eight officially recognized "democratic parties";

² In Huntington's view, the main alternatives to strong transitional political authority were *praetorianism* (government by military coup) and *revolution* (governmental collapse).

³ There is substantial evidence that Huntington's book, widely read by Chinese political reformers in the 1980s, was instrumental in inspiring Zhao Ziyang's proposals for limited political reform, introduced at the 13th CCP National Congress in 1987.

- Creation of provincial, municipal and county-level “electronic Government” websites for the public dissemination of administrative information and solicitation of public feedback on government performance;
- Expanded use of *xinfang* (“letters and visits”) offices to assist members of the public in reporting abuses of state power;
- Providing legal recourse for citizens suffering administrative abuse at the hands of state officials, formalized in the 1999 Administrative Litigation Act.
- Increasing the social representativeness and inclusiveness of the CCP by recruiting entrepreneurs and other emergent middle-class and *nouveaux-riches* strata into the Party, rationalized by Jiang Zemin’s “theory of the three represents”; and
- Promotion of the neo-Confucian cultural ideal of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) to foster peaceful resolution of conflicts of socio-economic interest arising from the reform-induced polarization of incomes and economic opportunities.

While a primary goal of such administrative adaptations is to improve governmental performance and responsiveness—or, in current jargon, “state capacity,” a series of steadily worsening societal problems and tensions—manifested in the sharply increasing frequency and intensity of incidents of mass social protest⁴-- have called into question the viability of this new, improved Chinese model of “consultative Leninism.” And this has raised anew the Huntingtonian question of the relationship between short-term political order and long-term political development.

The Nature of Consultative Leninism

In its traditional Maoist format, Chinese Leninism stressed the CCP’s indirect control over society via its top-down domination of mass organizations and functional associations. At the same time, the CCP sought to co-opt (and thereby neutralize) key non-Party social strata, such as intellectuals, by involving them in a series of consultative bodies, including the CPPCC and the eight so-called “democratic parties”. While nominally enjoying advisory and even supervisory functions vis-à-vis the party-state, these bodies were politically impotent in the Maoist regime, and were widely dismissed as “flowerpots” – that is, pleasant to look at, but carefully tended, watered and-- where necessary-- weeded by the Communist Party.

⁴ From approximately 14,000 officially recorded incidents of collective protest in 1993, the number rose to over 87,000 in 2005—an average increase of almost 15% per year.

Above all, the purpose of mass organizations and united front bodies alike was to help mold “unified public opinion” in support of CCP programs and policies.

With the death of Mao and the advent of economic reform and “opening up” under Deng Xiaoping, China’s economy and society became more complex and pluralistic. By the mid-1980s, there was talk of a new, post-Leninist Chinese development model.

Sometimes referred to as “small state, big society” model (*xiao guojia, da shehui*), this approach envisioned a substantial downsizing of the party-state apparatus, accompanied by the rise of a vibrant, spontaneous, and autonomous sphere of associational life at the grass-roots level.⁵ Implicit in the model was a recognition of the legitimacy of various different socio-economic interests and interest groups.

Movement in the direction of greater socio-political pluralism was endorsed by a group of younger CCP reformers in the late 1980s, under the patronage of Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. On the eve of the 13th Party Congress in October 1987, Zhao rejected the conventional Maoist view of “unified public opinion” under socialism, arguing that the government should be concerned with listening to and reflecting the divergent interests and opinions of its citizens.

While proposing a gradual, step by step transition to a more pluralistic, interest-based political process, Zhao stopped short of advocating Western-style constitutional democracy, with its separation of powers, multiparty competition and freedom of political expression. Noting that modernization and economic reform were inherently turbulent and stressful, Zhao argued (à la Huntington) that there were inevitably “many factors making for instability.” For this reason, he suggested (also in good Huntingtonian fashion) that the transition to political pluralism should be undertaken “step by step in an orderly way.”⁶

Unfortunately for Zhao—and for China-- his modest proposals for reform were mooted during the Beijing Spring of 1989, when self-organizing, independent groups of students, workers, and journalists spearheaded massive anti-government demonstrations. Boldly asserting their autonomy from state-sponsored mass organizations, the defiance of these dissidents proved

⁵ The term “small state, big society” was coined in connection with the creation of a new provincial-level Special Economic Zone on Hainan Island in 1988.

⁶ *Beijing Review* 30:45 (November 9-15, 1987), pp. VI, XV.

more than CCP elderly conservatives could tolerate. When the crackdown began, leaders of the newborn autonomous organizations were the first to be targeted for suppression. China's newly-emerging "civil society" was thus stillborn on June 4, and along with it was buried the "small state, big society" model.

The CCP's renewed determination to resist political pluralism – and to suppress it coercively when necessary -- gained added impetus from the shocking collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the aftermath of that event, Chinese leaders strongly condemned Gorbachev's "bourgeois liberalism" and reaffirmed their commitment to consultative Leninism, focusing once again on the need to preserve "unity and stability."

With political reform indefinitely shelved, the CCP's primary strategy for dealing with social discontent in 1990s was to isolate and cauterize it. When problems arose that could not be ignored – such as farmers protesting excessive fees or illegal land seizures; or laid-off workers demanding payment of their embezzled wages and pensions; or outraged parents demanding investigation of a fatal school explosion and fire -- these events were handled on an *ad hoc*, individual basis. So long as such incidents were localized, they could be dealt with by a paternalistic government determined to keep the lid on social disorder.

If necessary, village elections could be held to remove corrupt local cadres; government officials could launch a high-profile investigation into the causes of a school fire (or a coal-mine collapse; or a real-estate scam); and money could be found to pay off angry farmers, pensioners, and homeowners. If demonstrations persisted or spread, their leaders could be arrested or physically intimidated.

Such a strategy of localized, *ad hoc* administrative conflict containment comprises the essence of what Andy Nathan has called "authoritarian resilience," which combines economic liberalization with tight political control. Arguably, such a strategy is optimally effective when societal discontent is small in scale and widely dispersed, and when communication among aggrieved groups is difficult. What began happening in the late 1990s, however, was the mobilization of discontent by disadvantaged groups possessing modern means of communication -- cellphones, PCs, the Internet and SMS text messaging. As socialized manifestations of discontent became more numerous and larger in scale, their potential political threat to the regime became greater.

Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents"

Confronted in the late 1990s with signs of a growing disconnect between the Chinese party-state and Chinese society, Jiang Zemin sought to boost the Communist Party's flagging prestige. Articulating a controversial "theory of the three represents" (*sange daibiao lilun*), Jiang invited China's emergent *nouveaux riches* entrepreneurs and commercial elites to join the Communist Party. By including these new economic elites within the CCP's "big tent," Jiang hoped to broaden the socio-economic base of the Party and thereby increase its responsiveness.

However, Jiang's initiative did little to ease the "great wall of power" that separated the Party from the people. Although the "three represents" reflected a growing recognition of the need for the Party to embed itself more deeply and broadly within the society, many Chinese displayed a noncommittal, or even a cynical attitude toward the new doctrine; others were openly contemptuous, viewing it as a veiled attempt to co-opt upwardly mobile groups and individuals without diluting the Party's effective political monopoly.

The Need to "Strengthen Governing Capacity"

As the risk-averse Jiang Zemin moved toward retirement early in the present decade, it was widely anticipated that his successor, Hu Jintao, might be free to pursue a more progressive political agenda. Indeed, the prospects for meaningful reform seemed to brighten momentarily when the CCP Central Committee, meeting in September 2004, frankly acknowledged the fragility of Party rule and affirmed the existence of a deepening crisis of legitimacy:

"China's reform and development has reached a critical stage in which new problems are mushrooming.... The CCP's ruling status... will not last forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it.... We must develop a stronger sense of crisis... and strengthen our ruling capacity in a more earnest and conscientious manner."⁷

⁷ An abridged Chinese text of the Fourth Plenum Communiqué, entitled "*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu dangde zhizheng nengli jianshede jueding*" (Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on Building the Ruling Capacity of the Party) (September 19, 2004), appears in *Xinhua Wang Online* (Beijing), September 26, 2004. A lengthy English language commentary on the communiqué appears in http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/26/print20040926_158378.html.

To deal with the mounting crisis, the Central Committee Communique pledged that “The Party will guarantee that the people carry out democratic election, policy making, management and supervision according to law, while improving the People's Congress system and the system of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under Party leadership....⁸

But if the Fourth Plenum cautiously raised hopes for greater political openness and pluralism, Hu Jintao soon dashed them. In a September 2004 speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the National People's Congress, Hu made it clear that “strengthening the CCP's ruling capacity” did not mean diluting or relinquishing the Party's 55-year monopoly on political power:

“The Communist Party of China takes a dominant role and coordinates all sectors.... The leading position of the Party is a result of long-term practice and is clearly stipulated by the Constitution. . . . The role of Party organizations and Party members in government departments should be brought into full play. . . so as to realize the Party's leadership over state affairs.”⁹

Further underscoring the Party leadership's determination to tightly grip the reins of power, a lengthy commentary by Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong, published shortly after the Fourth Plenum, spelled out an expanded role for the Communist Party in China's governance. Among other things, Zeng called for tighter Party control over the legislative agenda and deliberations of the NPC; increased overlap, fusion (and blurred lines of functional responsibility) between the Party and the government; and closer Party supervision over the activities of interest groups.¹⁰

Not coincidentally, these three imperatives were the direct antitheses of reform initiatives proposed by Zhao Ziyang in 1987. In this and other respects, the Fourth Plenum's call to “strengthen governing capacity” was less a manifesto for political openness and reform than a call for reinforcing traditional CCP domination of the instruments and avenues of governance.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hu Jintao, “Speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National People's Congress” (September 15, 2004), in http://english.people.com.cn//200409/15/eng20040915_157073.html.

¹⁰ Zeng Qinghong, “A Programmatic Document for Strengthening the Party's Ruling Capacity: Study and Implement the Spirit of the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Party Committee, Strengthen the Party's Ruling Capacity, *People's Daily* (internet edition), October 8, 2004 (emphasis added).

The Quest for a “Harmonious Society”

Most recently, the drive to strengthen the CCP’s ruling capacity has been conjoined, somewhat paradoxically, with a revival of neo-Confucian philosophy, centering on the quest for a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*). Premier Wen Jiabao laid the cornerstone of this renaissance in March 2005, when he said: “We must build a harmonious socialist society that is... fair and just, trustworthy and friendly, full of vigor and vitality, secure and orderly, and in which man and nature are in harmony.”¹¹

A few weeks later, an article by a Vice-Chairman of the CCPCC clarified the political goal of “a harmonious society” as a desire to “reach unanimity... by harmonizing various interests, synthesizing different opinions and defusing complicated contradictions.”¹²

While this language sounds idealistic and vaguely utopian, and while both Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have emphasized that the basic guarantee of a “harmonious society” is the fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of economic development, the political implications of this formulation are strikingly authoritarian. In the view of China’s leaders, the unmediated, pluralistic interplay of contending socio-economic interests engenders disharmony; and since disharmony engenders disorder, a benign unifying force, standing above the fray, is needed to forge an authoritative, synthetic consensus among discordant social forces. The call for a “harmonious society” thus presupposes the existence of a paternalistic, superordinate authority—a “benign despot,” if you will—that is capable of faithfully reflecting, representing, and mediating the full spectrum of “legitimate” societal interests while suppressing persistently discordant ones. In this respect the notion of a “harmonious society” differs little from Jiang Zemin’s theory of the “three represents.”

The Future of Consultative Leninism

By substituting paternalistic consultation for autonomous political participation, co-optation for representation, advice for empowerment, and consensus-building for the clash of conflicting interests, the CCP has been able to avoid much of the putative clutter --and chaos --of

¹¹ The text of Zhao’s Report is reproduced in http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/22/content_207113.htm.

¹² *People’s Daily* (Overseas Edition), March 23, 2005.

democratic pluralism. But what of Huntington's institutional imperative? Has the Chinese party-state become more highly institutionalized and responsive – i.e., more *effective* -- as a governing institution? And if so, does this serve to increase or decrease China's likelihood of future democratization?

A recent, optimistic assessment of the improved quality of Chinese governance, by Dali Yang, focuses on a series of administrative reforms and adjustments adopted by the central government over the past decade or so.¹³ In his book, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan*, Yang cites numerous cases of effective “administrative tinkering” by China's top leaders.

For example, after fiscal decentralization in the 1980s had seriously reduced the central government's share of tax revenues, a sweeping new tax reform was introduced in the 90s, effectively restoring the center's fiscal authority.

Then again, when local government overstaffing, and runaway off-budget expenditures, threatened to get out of hand at the county and township levels in the 1990s, the Center again stepped in-- to “flatten” the administrative hierarchy and reduce local discretionary authority through such measures as consolidating township governments and abolishing the agricultural tax.

Similarly, when China's major banks were awash in NPLs in the late 1990s, the Center stepped in with a series of administrative adjustments—eliminating provincial bank branches, transferring bad loans to Asset Management Companies, recapitalizing the major banks, and opening the financial system to the discipline of international financial markets. The salutary effects of such reforms have been widely heralded.

In like manner, when the burgeoning incidence of corrupt or illegal land confiscations and real-estate development schemes led to widespread rural unrest early in the present decade, the Center strengthened its control over the administration of land-use regulations and fees.

And finally, when popular protest mounted over local governmental disregard of environmental protection rules and regulations, SEPA set up regional supervision centers to monitor and

¹³ Dali Yang, “State Capacity on the Rebound,” *Journal of Democracy* 14:1 (2003), p. 48. Also Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan* (Stanford U. Press, 2004).

supervise policy implementation, as a counterweight against the one-sided, pro-development bias of local governments.

The key to Yang's palpable optimism, derived from these (and other similar) examples, lies in his perception that Chinese leaders have demonstrated an impressive learning curve, designing effective administrative fixes to deal with emergent problems; and that they have thereby succeeded in narrowing the " yawning gap " between state and society that characterized China in the 1980s and early 90s. Consequently, he believes that China's "state capacity" has grown substantially –albeit non-democratically.

But this view also has its detractors. Casting a critical eye on China's recent administrative reforms, Minxin Pei, in his new book, *China's Trapped Transition*, argues that administrative adjustment, while it may ameliorate certain types of social problems in the short-run, is a dead-end in the long run.

This is because the CCP's dominant strategy of co-opting emergent socio-economic elites, while persisting in the use of coercive political controls to deal with dissent—a strategy which Pei characterizes as "illiberal adaptation", has actually heightened, rather than reduced, existing tensions between a predatory, "crony capitalist" elite and a powerless, atomized mass society. The result is what Pei calls a "trapped transition:"

"In China, mixing command and control with embryonic market forces enables the Communist party to tap efficiency gains from limited reforms to sustain the unreconstructed core of the old command economy – the economic foundation of its political supremacy. In a 'trapped transition,' ruling elites have little interest in real reforms. They may pledge reforms, but most such pledges are lip service or tactical adjustments aimed at maintaining the status quo.

Unlike Dali Yang, Minxin Pei sees a clear structural link between the post-Mao decentralization of budgetary authority and the rise of local state predation. He observes that the central government's 1993 blanket grant of authority to local governments to raise and retain extra-budgetary revenues triggered a virtual orgy of unrestrained fiscal predation and profligacy, as local officials raised and spent monies free from any close scrutiny or supervision from above.

Such a fundamental, structurally-induced “moral hazard” cannot be overcome by mere administrative tinkering, since it is built into the basic structure of China’s political economy, in the absence of effective mechanisms of horizontal political accountability. (In the language of principal-agent relations, the problem here is that the “fire alarms” intended to alert central authorities to the existence of serious problems at the local level have been rendered inoperable, so the regime must increasingly rely on “police patrols” to monitor and control its local agents.)

The inability of administrative adjustments to prevent and punish official predation and corruption is particularly severe at the township level, where illegal revenue extraction has been most egregious due to the absence of effective local monitoring and accountability mechanisms. One obvious result has been a dramatic rise in the incidence of rural tax protest, resistance, and even organized rebellion.

While village elections have arguably helped to restrain the worst predatory behavior in the countryside, this has not led to a significant “democratic empowerment” of ordinary villagers. This is true for two reasons: first, because the nomination and screening of candidates for village committees are controlled by the local party branch; and second, because the elected VCs have no independent political or fiscal authority, but are wholly subordinate agents of the township government.

Nor has the central government’s decision to abolish the agricultural tax solved the problem of local fiscal inequity, since the resulting budgetary shortfalls have hit hardest at precisely those poor rural areas that already lacked sufficient infrastructure and public goods provisioning, including affordable public schools and health care.

Thus, Pei sees administrative adjustments as ultimately doomed to failure, since they do not address the fundamental political-structural sources of inequity; and he concludes that:

“In the absence of a national reformist ethos, or of visionary reformers, China seems to be on a Long March to nowhere. China’s continuing economic growth merely vindicates current policies and disproves the need for change, perpetuating the trap. Riding this momentum, the party may muddle along for some time but it is hard to imagine that

China can evolve into a market democracy without a cataclysmic mid-course correction.”¹⁴

Conclusion: Whither China?

Given the fundamental disagreement that exists between Yang and Pei, between optimists and pessimists, where does reality lie? Is the Chinese glass half full or half empty? And where is the country headed, politically?

One possible outcome of China’s non-democratic development might, over time, be an efficient, Singapore-style “executive-dominant, administered state.” (Indeed, this is a favorite model of China’s new leadership.)

But the “Singapore model” is underpinned by a number of unique economic, demographic and institutional factors that are simply lacking in China, including: a robust rule of law; a professional, uncorrupt civil service; high per-capita income and education levels; and the absence of a vast, impoverished rural population (Singapore is, after all, merely a *city-state*, albeit a well-administered one).

Moreover, despite its “soft authoritarian” political system and the continuing dominance of a single political party, Singapore also displays a degree of electoral competition, a pluralistic media, and well developed institutions of public opinion that are utterly lacking in China today. For example, the ruling PAP must periodically contest public elections; and the government must therefore pay close attention to the public mood. Absent even such imperfect, half-formed feedback mechanisms, China stands a poor chance of emerging as the next Singapore

Ultimately, the principal difference between the optimistic and pessimistic prognoses for China’s future boils down to the question of whether China’s current regime, which I have characterized as “consultative Leninism,” can, when aided by the various administrative adjustments described by Dali Yang, effectively-- and over the long haul-- serve to increase the responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of the Chinese Communist party-state. Needless to say, there is precious little consensus on this vital question.

¹⁴ Minxin Pei, “China Is Stagnating in Its ‘Trapped Transition’”, *Financial Times*, February 24, 2006. Also Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition* (Harvard U. Press, 2006).

My own view tends to fall somewhere between the optimist and pessimist stools. In opting for the relatively safe “middle” ground, I find myself generally in agreement with Sam Huntington, who argued that the selection pressures of modernity would eventually tend to favor democratic development because of democracy’s superior capacity to adapt, reconcile, represent and respond to a plurality of emergent social forces and stresses.

Most recently, this Huntingtonian formulation has been given empirical substantiation in the work of Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, whose article, “Development and Democracy,” appeared in the journal *Foreign Affairs* a little more than a year ago. In this article, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs provided empirical data to support the argument that an enlightened, forward-looking authoritarian regime can effectively prolong its existence through a selective combination of growth-inducing economic liberalization and dissent-inhibiting denial of “coordination goods,” such as freedom of organization and assembly, voting rights, and media and Internet freedoms:

“[P]lenty of evidence now suggests that autocratic and illiberal governments of various stripes can delay democracy for a very long time. . . . What explains the often lengthy lag between the onset of economic growth and the emergence of liberal democracy? The answer lies in the growing sophistication of authoritarian governments. Although development theorists correctly assume that increases in per capita income lead to increases in popular demand for political power, they consistently underestimate the ability of oppressive governments to thwart those demands.

“In the long term, however, economic growth can threaten the survival of repressive governments by raising the likelihood that effective political competitors will emerge. This happens for two reasons: (1) economic growth raises the stakes of the political game by increasing the spoils available to the winner, and (2) it leads to an increase in the number of individuals with sufficient time, education, and money to get involved in politics. Both these changes can set in motion a process of democratization that, slowly gathering momentum, can eventually overwhelm an autocratic status quo and create a competitive, liberal democracy in its place.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, “Development and Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2005.

Analyzing data from 150 historical cases, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs conclude that by linking economic liberalism to the withholding of coordination goods, an authoritarian regime can extend its life-expectancy by 10-15%, thereby delaying the onset of democratization (or, alternatively, of political collapse) by a maximum of about about ten years. If they are correct, then we might anticipate that pressures for institutional reform – including democratic pluralism – are very likely to increase. If the regime does not soon begin to introduce an array of pluralistic feedback mechanisms, and provide a greater variety of “coordination goods,” then in the long-run, no amount of “administrative tinkering” or “economic liberalism” is likely to prove effective in staving off political instability.