

## 5 China after Deng Xiaoping: The search for a non-democratic development model

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### Historical and political context

While the death of Deng Xiaoping in 1997 marked the end of strongman politics it did not represent a paradigm shift in the politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Deng's death merely signalled an end to an era during which the paramount leader could exert power disproportionate to the office or position he held in the state or party apparatus and exert a decisive or nearly decisive influence on politics in general and government policies in particular. The political setup in China after Deng was laid down well in advance. Indeed, Deng even pre-arranged the succession of his own immediate successor as leader of the country. Although he was Deng's successor as the 'third generation' leader Jiang Zemin had neither the scope nor the personal clout to assert himself as a new strongman. Deng had not intended to give him the scope to do so, as reflected in the naming of Hu Jintao as Jiang's successor. Nor were Jiang's colleagues willing to see him emerge as a new strongman.

Jiang's coming out of the shadow of Deng after the latter's death in 1997 as the real leader of China in a sense marked a return of the Communist Party system to what it was supposed to be just after it seized power in 1949. The system that was put in place was meant to be a collective leadership of the top party leaders with a core leader being the first among equals. In the history of the PRC, such an arrangement was formally maintained in the early 1950s even though Mao was in reality a dominant figure from the time when the PRC was founded. The principle of collective leadership ended when Mao Zedong forced his comrades to choose between accepting his leadership above the collective wisdom of the Party or allow him to wage war against the party leadership at the Lushan Conference of 1959 (Li, 1993: 226-36). Mao's comrades backed down and allowed the Great Leap Forward to be reinvigorated at a time when there could be little illusion that this would bring catastrophic consequences to the country (Chan, 2001: 107-8). This marked the rise of a particularly vicious brand of strongman politics within the Communist system, which allowed Mao to launch the disastrous Cultural Revolution less than a decade later.

It is true that the post-Mao Communist Party leadership was determined to make the Maoist period an aberration and other veteran party leaders like Chen Yun tried to check Deng's power and ensure a collective leadership would replace the Maoist dictatorship (Yang, 2004:15-8). Ironically even Deng himself rejected the Maoist approach in building a personality cult or the Maoist brand of strongman politics when he started the reform process.

Indeed, in the early years of the Dengist period he pushed for a programme to strengthen the political institutions of the PRC. However, he gradually asserted himself as the paramount leader (Zhong, 2007a: 153-4). Deng used his relative dominance in Chinese politics to push forward his economic reform programme in the 1980s, to play a pivotal role in directing the military crackdown and restore order and the dominance of the Communist Party in June 1989, and to re-launch his policy

of reform in 1992. Thus, until his death Deng maintained a different and a less vicious brand of strongman politics than that prevailed under Mao. He took on the mantle of a strongman because the political system and his personal history within the Communist Party allowed him to do so, and he thought he was doing so for a good cause (Zhong, 2007b: 153-4).

With Deng's passing the top Communist leaders had an understanding among themselves that they needed to change the way how the country was to be governed. With the original revolutionary leaders almost all passed from the scene, a return to strongman politics was generally seen as undesirable. Moreover, there was no one who could stand out sufficiently to assert a degree of personal impact on politics that Deng could and retain loyalty among other leaders. The critical questions for the post-Deng leadership were the direction and nature of changes to be introduced. The basic premises were that whatever they would be they must ensure, first and foremost, the continuation of Communist Party rule and, in order to achieve this, stability, order, steadily improving living conditions and improved governance.

Jiang's rise to the top of political power coincided with an upsurge of the attraction of democracy as an idea in the global context, as it was the decade that saw the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Although Francis Fukuyama was wrong in proclaiming the 'end of history' as the Soviet camp lost the Cold War, his bold statement captured the spirit of the time (Fukuyama, 1992). In the 1990s it was not unreasonable to ask whether China might also move towards democratization when strongman politics came to an end. But the Chinese leaders saw this prospect as a threat to themselves and all that they represented rather than as a solution to the predicaments they faced. They looked at the idea that China should change in the direction advocated by the West under the 'hegemonic' leadership of the United States of America (USA) in terms of a 'peaceful evolution' conspiracy (Nelan, 1991). It was one that the Chinese Communist Party leadership was determined to resist.

Nevertheless, China under Jiang, and his successor Hu Jintao, did seek to find an alternative to strongman politics in governing China. Jiang was the first ever top leader of the PRC who referred to the Communist Party as a governing party (Tan & Xiao, 2006: 48) thus implying recognition of the need for the Party to justify its continuous rule. However, this does not mean he took the position that the Party's status as a vanguard party had ended. Instead of looking at democratization as an alternative way forward he and his successor, Hu, prefer to go back into China's own past, both in the Communist period and before, to find a solution. This chapter examines the Communist Party leadership's search for a non-democratic development model since 1997 and its implications.

## **Good governance as an alternative to democracy**

What the post-Deng leadership in China seek is a development model in the twenty-first century that is different from Western liberal democracy (Pan, 2008). It reflects on the one hand a sense of national pride that China should have its own model of development. On the other hand, and much more importantly, this approach is predicated by the nature and the history of the Leninist regime in China. The idea of 'learning to lose' as the dominant political party in an authoritarian state transforming into a liberal democracy must do is anathema to the Communist Party.

The sense of national pride is deeply rooted in the general history of China,

which has been greatly reinforced since 1989 by the Communist Party adopting nationalism as the new ideological force to unite the country and buttress its own rule after Communism all but collapsed as the state ideology. China was until around the sixteenth century the world leader in scientific development, communication, production technologies and administrative organisation. It also accounted for a large percentage of world output prior to the twentieth century. It was estimated to have produced 26.2 per cent of world GDP two thousand years ago, 22.7 per cent in 1000, 25 per cent in 1500, and 32.9 per cent in 1820, shortly before it was humbled by Queen Victoria's rising British Empire (Maddison, 2001: 263). While Hu Jintao may not know this history well, he feels that '[i]n a history that spans more than five millennia, the Chinese nation has contributed significantly to the progress of human civilization' and it must therefore adopt 'a new concept of development in line with its national conditions and the requirement of the times' (Hu, 2006). Looking back into history, Chinese leaders and intellectuals are justified in thinking that since China's own approach had sustained itself as a 'superpower' in the pre-modern age, there is no logical reason why a new resurgent China cannot or should not do so again in the twenty-first century.

This intellectual justification based on history, be it convincing or not, is greatly reinforced by the Party's tight control over historical narrative in China's school text books and the promotion of nationalism since 1989. Few citizens of the PRC in fact know the history of their country well but they have all been indoctrinated in the greatness of China's long civilization and the iniquity of the 'century of humiliation' when China suffered from Western imperialism after 1838 (Yuan, 2006). The nationalism promoted since 1989 is essentially xenophobic in nature, which encouraged the Chinese people to identify with a rising China under the leadership of the Communist Party in juxtaposition against the West that is portrayed as uncomfortable with China's resurgence.<sup>1</sup> The idea that China should find its own development model rather than import a variant of the dominant democratic model from the West is, therefore, one that has wide appeal in China.<sup>2</sup>

Even more powerful a factor is the fact that although Communism is no longer routinely upheld as the state ideology and Communism is no longer the ultimate goal for development, the Communist Party remains essentially Leninist in character. This means it is fundamentally anti-democratic in the meaning of the term in the Western liberal tradition.

The leading role and position of the Party is enshrined in the Constitution of the PRC, and remains the basic principle that underpins the political system in China (People's Republic of China, 1982). The replacement of strongman politics by a liberal democratic one will require the Communist Party to give up its constitutionally enshrined leading position and contest for a popular mandate to govern periodically through open and fair elections. This goes against the basic belief of the Communist Party about democracy, which is that the Party fully supports 'democracy' as long as electoral outcomes are predictable and guaranteed to be correct as seen by the Party leadership. The mechanism that guarantees this is the principle of democratic centralism and its Maoist variant known as 'from the masses and to the masses'. In essence this means the Party must go to the masses to collect and collate ideas from them, then organize and otherwise add new input to produce a coherent and constructive set of policies and then take them back to the masses, educate and otherwise induce the masses to embrace such policies as their own ideas (Saich,

2004: 44). When the Communist Party refers to 'democracy' in China this is in general terms the meaning it has in mind.

The search for an alternative to democratization in the post-strongman era is based on a need for the Communist Party, still the 'vanguard party' or 'guardian' of the people, to devise and implement a model that will deliver stability, order, prosperity and good governance. The first post-Deng manifestation of this new model was described by Jiang Zemin in terms of 'the Three Represents', a concept he articulated for the first time in July 2001. This required the Party to represent 'the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people' ([www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), 2006). Jiang elaborated on this by saying:

The whole Party must always maintain the spirit of advancing with the times and constantly extend Marxist theory into new realms; it must give top priority to development in governing and invigorating the country and constantly break new ground and open up a new prospect in the modernization drive; it must fully mobilize all positive factors and constantly generate new strength for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; and it must improve its Party building in a spirit of reform and constantly inject new vitality into itself ([www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), 2006).

Jiang's concept was not clearly spelled out except on upholding the leading role of the Party with a new requirement. It was the need to broaden the basis of the Party from an alliance of workers and peasants to include the culturally advance and economically vibrant elements of society though still firmly under the leadership of senior party apparatchiks.

After Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang as General Secretary of the Communist Party in 2002 and as state President in 2003, he gradually modified Jiang's approach. He downplays the concept of 'the Three Represents' and adopts a policy of promoting a socialist harmonious society. Hu's formula stipulates that 'a harmonious society should feature democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality' in order to produce 'lasting stability and unity' (Hu, 2005). More specifically, Hu calls for:

- sustained, rapid and coordinated economic growth both in the countryside and in the urban regions;
- allowing public opinions to be articulated so that 'a democratic policy-making mechanism will help balance different social interests and avoid social conflicts';
- rigorous implementation of 'the rule of law' in all political, administrative and judicial sectors to check the abuse of power;
- balancing different interests and strive 'to ensure equality for all in terms of personal rights, opportunities, game-playing rules and wealth distribution';
- establishing a social management system to handle the people's internal contradictions to prevent them from posing risks to the overall development of the country; and
- strengthening environmental protection in order to pre-empt serious social problems (Hu, 2005).

Whether it is Jiang's 'three represents' or Hu's 'socialist harmonious society' policy, the real thrusts of reform in the political arena are to improve governance,

reach out to the general public, redress public grievances and improve living conditions. The key instrument for delivering improvements in these areas remains the government controlled by the Communist Party itself. The development model that the post-Deng leadership has adopted is intended to pre-empt popular demands for liberal democracy and to be based on a strengthened benevolent one party system that practises democratic centralism.

## Consultative Leninism

The traditional Chinese concept of 'the ideal government... is one which is efficient, fair, honest and paternalistic, yet non-intrusive vis-à-vis the life of the ordinary people' (Tsang, 1995: 5). This is not a template that the Chinese Communist leadership intends to adopt after the end of strongman politics. Not least it is because the traditional Chinese concept goes fundamentally against the nature of the Communist Party in a key area. Being a Leninist institution the Communist Party is about pro-actively leading and directing developments in the country and mobilizing the general population to follow its lead. Such an approach inherently requires the Party to intrude into the life of the ordinary people. The other qualities cherished in traditional China are not objectionable to the Communist Party, as long as it is the judge of efficiency, fairness and honesty. As a vanguard party, paternalism - again, as interpreted and judged by itself, is in any event integral to what it represents.

The definition of 'good governance with Chinese characteristics' is one that needs to be treated carefully. The 'Chineseness' in this concept is not based on the traditional Chinese culture. Instead, it is what the Communist Party, as the ruler and 'guardian' of China, decides as appropriate for China.

It should, however, be pointed out that this also does not exclude the adoption of traditional Chinese concepts, and the idea of a 'socialist harmonious society' represents an appropriation of a well known Confucian concept by the Party.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in defining good governance with Chinese characteristics the Communist Party looks back into both its own relatively short history and China's long history for ideas and inspirations.

The Party also examines ideas and experience from outside of China as it constructs an alternative model of development to democratization that is suited to the 'special conditions of China'. An important set of lessons the Chinese Communist Party learned are the causes that led to the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Fewsmith, 2001: 52-3). Also of great interest to the Party are the experiences of the 'Asian tiger economies' under authoritarian rule. In this context the case of Singapore is deemed particularly relevant, as its dominant People's Action Party is able to stay in power continuously by delivering what the local people want and co-opting potential or actual critics into its ranks (Chen, 1993: 5-10). The final product is, however, what the Communist Party chooses to put together regardless of their origins and label as a distinctly modern Chinese approach.

In choosing an instrument to deliver good governance the Party leadership rejected both a new strongman and a democratic system. Instead it picked the Communist Party itself (Xinhuanet, 2006). It is an instrument that requires constant reform and updating. The Party seeks to meet the new challenges 'by attempting to broaden its membership base, promoting a new generation of leaders, reformulating its ideological content, appealing to nationalist impulses in society, strengthening its



organizational apparatus throughout the country, and opening the channels of discourse within the party and between the party-state and society' (Shambaugh, 2008: 9). Such an approach, which is reinforced by increasing institutionalization and merit based promotion, as demonstrated in the peaceful generational transfer of power in the Sixteenth Party Congress of 2002, has helped to create what Andrew Nathan has called 'resilient authoritarianism' (Nathan, 2003: 6-17) - an increasingly stable kind of authoritarianism that is distinct from strongman politics.

To do so, the Communist Party is prepared to introduce reforms in the political arena aimed at enhancing its own capacity and that of the state to govern effectively. It should be emphasized that such reforms are not political reforms but governance reforms. They are not meant to be political changes in the direction of democratization but administrative and other changes intended to pre-empt the need for democratization (Tan & Xiao, 2006: 215-6). The Party uses 'a mix of measures to shore up popular support, resolve local protests, and incorporate the beneficiaries of economic reform into the political system' (Dickson, 2005: 37). Reforms, including anti-corruption drives and enhancing the Party's capacity to know the trends of public opinions, are deemed as necessary to enhance positively the governance capacity of the Party. At the same time the Party also 'forcefully represses efforts to challenge its authority and monopoly on political power and organization' (Dickson, 2005: 37).

The biggest difference between Jiang Zemin's approach and that of his successor Hu Jintao lies in the latter's tendency to do so by revitalizing selectively some of the Maoist ideas or practices to strengthen the capacity of the Communist Party. They include, for example, putting new emphasis on reviving the principle of democratic centralism (Wang, 2006: 354). as well as making a public commitment to redress the neglect and abuse faced by the rural population, who had been left behind in the rush towards fastest possible growth under Jiang. This represents a stronger recognition that the Party must deliver social justice in order to pre-empt discontent in the countryside from developing into a source of instability (Shambaugh, 2008: 114-5). Hu Jintao takes the view that 'the biggest danger to the Party ... has been losing touch with the masses' and the Party leadership must therefore 'focus on the core issue of the inextricable link between the Party and the masses' (quoted in Nathan & Gilley, 2002: 193-4). His approach also reflects awareness of how effective some of the Maoist mobilization and propaganda methods were, before they gained a strong negative connotation for being the instruments that made the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution possible. It was Leninism modified to incorporate effective consultation of the general public by practising democratic centralism.

## What does this imply?

Specifically the development model the post-Deng leadership has devised seeks to support rapid and sustainable growth as the basis for ensuring public support for the continuation of Communist Party rule without resorting to the ballot box. In return, the party devotes itself to deliver the following objectives:

- build a framework for political and social stability, including institutionalizing the framework for periodic changes of leadership, rule by law and reduction of corruption;
- enhance the administrative capacity, including institutionalizing promotion on the basis of merit, so that the state (led by the Party) can deliver real

improvements in the living conditions of the people;

- strengthen the state and the Party's capacity to reach out to the general population and win over their support; and
- re-invigorate the ideological framework to secure the loyalty of the people.

The greater emphasis laid on institutionalization unquestionably helps to make Chinese politics less volatile. It has resulted in the peaceful and relatively uneventful transfer of power between Jiang's 'third generation' leadership and Hu's 'fourth generation' leaders. The significance of this development should not be overlooked as Jiang and Hu are the first two anointed successors to have successfully taken up office as the top leader in the PRC in six decades. It marks a break from the past when all anointed successors, from Liu Shaoqi to Zhao Ziyang ended their careers in dramatic and in most cases tragic circumstances.

If the pattern set by Jiang and Hu's succession to the top is sustained (and there is so far no strong evidence to suggest it will not be) this will make the politics of succession nearly predictable, even if this involves considerable horse-trading behind the scene. The resistance on the part of Jiang to hand over all powers and positions to Hu in 2002-3 suggests that Jiang was tempted to try to assert himself as the paramount leader (Ru & Zhai, 2002: 50-2). But the fact that he had to relinquish all such offices, including the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission by 2004 confirms that those who favour institutionalizing the succession process won eventually. The new practice that is being institutionalized also provides for future top leaders to be placed as an apprentice or deputy to the top leader for five years before ascending to the top in the state and the Party. The handing over of power may not be democratic but it is becoming structured, stable and basically predictable.

Another important element of the institutionalization process is the increasing importance being put on enforcing the law and containing corruption. In sharp contrast to the Maoist days when the law was reduced to irrelevance, major steps have been taken by the Communist Party to rule by law (Chen, 2006: 195-6). To be sure the Communist Party and its top leadership remain above the law and there is no indication that they are individually or collectively willing to subject themselves to the law, in contrast to allowing one of their own to face the force of the law in special cases.

A notable and highly illustrative example is the case of Party Secretary for Shanghai and Politburo member Chen Liangyu, who was dismissed in 2006 and finally jailed in 2008 for 18 years for corruption and abuse of office (Barboza, 2008). Chen's case confirms that the Party will subject one of its own top level leaders to the judicial system when it suits the political convenience of the top leadership. On this occasion it helped Hu to consolidate his power as Chen was a protégé of Jiang Zemin, and his sacking signalled the end of Jiang's 'Shanghai faction' as an effective political force. It also helps to project the image that the Party was prepared to punish corrupt officials even at nearly the top.

This case was essentially similar to the downfall of former Beijing Party Secretary and Politburo member Chen Xitong. Chen was removed from office in 1995 and sentenced in 1998 to 16 years imprisonment for corruption and dereliction of duty (Faison, 1998). Chen Xitong was required to face the force of the law for some of his corrupt deeds because it was in the interest of Jiang and the Communist Party for him to do so.

These two high profile cases also reveal the limits of the law and the anti-

corruption drive in China. Lower ranked officials guilty of corruption had been punished much more severely, including being executed for such a crime.

What is being put in place in post-Deng China is not the rule of law, essential for democracy to function properly and flourish. It is a stronger commitment to allow the law to be enforced where politics is not involved. In other words in cases with no wider political implications, the law is increasingly being upheld and the Communist Party seeks to govern through the enforcement of the law rather than in spite of the law (Lubman, 2006: 6-7). The choice of corruption in addition to abuse of power or dereliction of duty as the basis for the prosecution of the two Chens reflects a recognition on the part of the Party that it must be seen to tackle corruption, even though bureaucratic corruption remains entrenched.

Systemic corruption, as distinct from corruption by greedy individuals, cannot be eradicated as China lacks the necessary institutional checks and balances against corruption as well as the rule of law and Judicial review or similar due processes. However, for a population used to corruption and abuse of power, a well presented high profile attempt to contain the ills of corruption still goes a long way in rectifying the credibility deficit of the government and the Communist Party.

The ascendance of the 'third' and the 'fourth generation' leaders also marked another major change from the past, when the top positions were held almost exclusively by revolutionary cadres. This generational transfer of power meant technocrats had replaced the revolutionary cadres holding all the top offices in the government and the party by the time Jiang became the genuine core of the third generation leadership in 1997.

The technocrats have a different outlook from the 'old revolutionaries' (Zheng, 2000: 12). They also recognize that none of them can really take over Deng's mantle as the paramount leader (Shirk, 2007: 46). They cannot justify their hold to power by their revolutionary pedigree as founders of the PRC or veterans of the 'revolutionary war' or of the Long March. Instead they must do so by demonstrating their competence and political skills in keeping others in line.

This implies a greater acceptance of the idea of a meritocracy based on expert knowledge in government or in other relevant fields including political astuteness required to operate effectively in a Leninist system. Since the legitimacy of Communist Party rule after 1989 has been based in part on a *de facto* social contract that the people will acquiesce in the continuation of the Party's monopoly of power as long as the Party will deliver continuous improvements in living conditions, improving the governing capacity of the Party is vital.

The other element that sustains this *de facto* social contract, namely that the Party's political dominance should not be challenged as it has the will and the means to use force to suppress any such attempt, also requires a strengthening of the administrative capacity of the Party. With the technocrats lacking the standing Deng Xiaoping enjoyed in the armed forces that enabled him to deploy the Army to stage the brutal crackdown in June 1989 despite the initial public articulation of reservation within the military establishment, the rise of the technocrats to power provides a strong incentive for the new top leadership to pre-empt a crisis that will require calling out the Army to implement a similar military crackdown.

The Party leadership's need to enhance governance capacity requires a greater emphasis being put on merit in recruitment and promotion within the Party and the government (Shambaugh, 2008: 142-3). This does not spell the end of



privileges or relevance of family background. The so called Princelings faction - or, the grouping of senior cadres who are descendants of leaders of the revolution - has not visibly suffered from the adoption of a more meritocratic approach in selecting top level leaders. On the contrary, many senior cadres of princeling background have had privileged upbringings, career backgrounds and family connections that enable them to build up the necessary technical competence and political skills to operate effectively within the Party. This puts them in good positions to gain promotion on the basis of merit.

The elevation at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (2007) of Xi Jinping to become the unofficial heir apparent to Hu Jintao shows the Party's emphasis on meritocracy in action. The promotion of Xi, a princeling, despite Hu's personal preference for anointing non-princeling Li Keqiang, has widely been attributed to 'two things: the economic success of two coastal provinces where he served as party secretary; and his appeal—or at least factional neutrality—within China's Communist Party' (Liu & Ansfield, 2007). By accepting a system that enables the more able administrators and political operators to rise more quickly, the Party is able to ensure that its upper echelons are filled by individuals who are most able to work effectively within the existing political system.

One other factor that has strengthened the general governance capacity of the Party is Hu Jintao's personal quality and approach as the top leader. He is both politically astute and decisive though he remains highly cautious. As the top leader he appears to have learned a key lesson from the political infightings in the run-up to the swelling of the Tiananmen protests of 1989. It is that by acting decisively and in unity the Party can reduce the risk of popular challenges getting out of control, which happened in the spring of 1989 as internal divisions at the top became public knowledge when the Party failed to act quickly and decisively at the start of the protests (Nathan & Link, 2001: xxxvi). The swift and effectively choreographed responses to the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008 reveals that the top leadership was able to react quickly and collectively in defining the framework for responding to and reporting on this horrendous natural disaster. When confronted with the first crisis since coming to power Hu seized the moment to strengthen the state and the Party's capacity to reach out to the general population and win over their support, rather than dithering which would have eroded credibility of his government.

By dispatching Premier Wen Jiabao to the disaster scene while he retained supreme control in Beijing, Hu projected the image that the government cared about the victims and that the top leadership worked closely together. It focused public attention on the efforts being led by the central government itself and directed media coverage to showcase the rescue efforts rather than the sufferings of the victims (Spencer, 2008). It also distracted attention, even of the international media, from raising obvious questions about China's less than perfect rescue operations. The Chinese government's decision not to invite and permit foreign rescue teams to go to Sichuan immediately after the scale of the earthquake was known meant irreplaceable time for rescuing victims from collapsed buildings was lost. In the end the first external or foreign rescue teams were only allowed to reach the scene of the earthquake in any number on day four, when experience elsewhere established that by then relatively few survivors trapped in collapsed buildings or buried under rubble could be pulled out alive. Whatever the government's considerations were for such a decision, the adroit management of the public image of the rescue

operations allowed the importance of this specific and inhuman policy decision to go largely unnoticed.

By laying claim to the moral high ground and turning public reactions to the disaster into a nationalist response Hu's government made it possible to win wide praise and support from the country generally and to deflect the inevitable criticisms on failings in the rescue and relief operations on the ground. Where such criticisms cannot be silenced, they were directed against inadequate performance of lower level officials in Sichuan and thus avoided criticism being directed against the overall performance of the central government. This helps to sustain the central government's positive image and moral authority which, in turn, reinforces its governance capacity and legitimacy.

In addition, by beaming images of 'Grandpa Wen' at the front of the disaster zone, the Chinese government reached out to the general public nationwide in a paternalistic way. Through its well-oiled propaganda machine it created a heroic image of the government led by Premier Wen saving victims of a natural disaster in the front line and under the overall leadership of General Secretary Hu. Some of these images are reminiscent of the early Maoist period when top level leaders were portrayed side by side with the ordinary people cheerfully confronting challenges nature posed against China's development. More importantly, the effective operation of the propaganda machine enabled the government to claim unobtrusively credit for galvanizing the country to respond proudly as a nation, once the outpouring of sympathy nationwide turned into self-organized and non-government organization (NGO) based efforts to help the victims. With its moral authority established, the government was able to lead and require NGOs to co-operate without appearing too heavy-handed.



Sources: Wen's photograph in Beichuan on 14 May 2008 is from Xinhua, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2008-05/14/content\\_8168159.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2008-05/14/content_8168159.htm) (accessed 30 May 2008); and Mao's photograph is from the People's Daily website <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/4805228.html> (accessed 29 May 2008).

This reveals an important improvement in governance capacity as the government allowed a much larger scope than usual for NGOs to take civic actions at a time of a major natural disaster. It confirms a degree of recognition that allowing

a greater scope for civil society to operate during a natural disaster that caught the imagination of the nation is unavoidable. But it also reveals the existence of a strategy for the government to play a leadership role in directing the efforts of NGOs. The approach Hu has adopted is to treat civil society like a bird in a cage. The Party or the state is prepared to enlarge the cage as it sees fit but a cage is nonetheless maintained. This is to ensure that civil society can have sufficient scope to operate in the non-critical realm while its ambition to extend its scope to the critical realm is contained so that the development of civil society cannot pose a threat to the continuation of Communist Party rule.

The last thrust of the post-Deng leadership's efforts to increase its governance capacity is to promote nationalism as the new ideological force that binds the country together under the leadership of the Communist Party. Since Communism in effect ceased being the state ideology sometime between the Tiananmen protests of 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Communist Party needed to put in place a new ideological framework. This was in part a reaction to the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as the Chinese establishment began to fear social disintegration following 'the decline of the traditional ideology' (Zheng, 1999: 51). It was also because the Party intended to pre-empt Western values and beliefs from captivating Chinese citizens living in an ideological void (Chen: 1996: 74). In any event, the provision of an ideological binding force is needed to enable the Leninist system function as effectively as before, as the existence of a state ideology is integral to the Leninist system.

The choice of nationalism as the new state ideology is meant to enhance the Communist Party's capacity to stay in power on two mutually reinforcing levels. It is to provide a new ideological basis for legitimacy on one hand and to serve as a new rallying force to develop a national aspiration around the leadership of the Party on the other. After the cleavages created between the Party and the ordinary people by the Tiananmen Massacre, the top Party leaders found nationalism 'the most reliable claim to the Chinese people's loyalty and the only important value shared by the regime and its critics' (Zhao, 2005-6: 134). They thus 'moved quickly to position themselves as the defenders of China's national pride' (Zhao, 2005-6: 134). This involved reviving xenophobia, which manifested itself spectacularly in the Boxing Uprising of 1900 and 'continued as a dominant posture in state ideology during much of the People's Republic' (Brook, 1998: 210). It has been reinforced by the leadership's effort to use it as a rallying point to pursue greater power and prosperity for the nation since 1989.

More specifically, the Party launched an extensive propaganda and educational campaign to indoctrinate the people in patriotism and instil in them a new sense of citizenship. It is one that requires the citizens of the PRC to participate in affirming 'the rightness and acceptability of the state, its values, policies and agencies' (Kelly, 2006: 201). At the core of this campaign was to emphasize 'how China's unique national conditions make it unprepared to adopt Western style liberal democracy' and how China's existing political system helped to 'maintain political stability, a prerequisite for rapid economic development' (Zhao, 2005-6: 135).

By '[r]einforcing China's national confidence and turning past humiliation and current weakness into a driving force for China's modernization' the Party has turned nationalism into 'an effective instrument for enhancing [its] legitimacy' (Zhao, 2005-6: 135). The intention was to instil in the mind of the Chinese people a sense of pride in

China and its development that is inseparable from the leadership of the Communist Party or a strong feeling of 'my government right or wrong'.

The success of this nationalist indoctrination campaign manifested itself dramatically in 2008, the year the Communist Party had intended to launch the rebranded modern China on the occasion of the Beijing Olympics. The force of nationalism, however, could not be contained until the Olympics as it was originally planned. The rise of China in the early twenty-first century had generated so much pride that the nationalists could not wait.

They asserted themselves internationally when the Olympic torch relay outside of China generated unfavourable foreign comments and reactions in April. The negative foreign reactions were directed mainly at the way the Chinese authorities organized the torch relay, which was heavily guarded by elite members of the People's Armed Police dressed as torch attendants. Chinese nationalists reacted angrily and strongly against those who demonstrated in foreign cities where the torch passed against specific Chinese government policies including that on Tibet (Ramzy, 2008). What they readily ignored was the fact that by sending elite police officers who often told the local police how the torch should be guarded during the overseas relay China was interfering into the domestic affairs of the host countries concerned. If the same were allowed to happen in reverse, with the country hosting the Olympics sending police officers to tell the Beijing Police how to guard a torch relay in Beijing, it would have caused huge uproars and resentment. The large number of Chinese citizens who responded so nationalistically to protests during the torch relay showed that they preferred to choose to 'side with the government when foreigners criticize it, believing that, no matter how corrupt [or misguided] the government is, foreigners have no right to make unwarranted remarks about China and its people' (Zhao, 2005-6: 136).

The Party's adoption of nationalism also dramatically enhanced its governance capacity in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008. By adopting a nationalist approach to the rescue operation and holding back entry of foreign teams from reaching the scene, the Chinese government ensured that nearly all survivors were saved by soldiers of the People's Liberation Army and other Chinese rescue workers. The heroism of the rescue operations by the Chinese nation was thus used to galvanize a countrywide movement to rally around the Party's leadership in the subsequent relief efforts, even though generous foreign aid and donations were readily accepted.

Thus, however well or poorly the Party might have actually performed on the ground, and whether bureaucratic corruption and other policy failures were responsible for the collapse of a disproportionately large number of school buildings, the Party still emerged from this first major test it faced since 1989 stronger than before. Just as the astute management of propaganda after the earthquake ensured a positive image of the Party being projected, the long standing indoctrination of nationalism produced a people 'willing to dissociate their leaders in Beijing from the local officials they blame' (Mitchell & Dickie, 2008: 5). The Chinese government may not be able to silence all grieving parents but it can divert their anger from the central government to specific individuals or departments at the local level and reduce the negative impact on the credibility of the central government as a whole (Magnier, 2008).

While the Party's approach to strengthening governance capacity is the key to



reinforcing the most important instrument for developing a modern development model in post-Deng China, the Party has, as yet, not produced a clear and well thought through development model. The underlying principle governing its 'development model' is still essentially the same that the Chinese government followed in the heydays of the Dengist reforms. It is one of exploring all options gingerly, testing them and adopting those that appear to work, which is best summed up in the phrase 'crossing a stream by feeling for stones under the water'. The really important difference between the 1980s and the 2000s lies in the much increased capacity for the Party to judge what experimental policies work and to take effective actions to implement them. The technical competence of the cadres and their mental horizon under Hu are substantially greater than their predecessors a generation ago.

Another useful concept for understanding the Chinese approach is that of the bird cage analogy used earlier. In this analogy the bird represents the experimentations required to establish a modern development model whereas the cage is the scope and framework within which the bird can fly and seek to push the boundary. The Communist Party is the owner of the bird and the cage, and it is keen to see the bird put up good shows and make good progress but without breaking the cage or breaking out of the cage. With the bird growing and making a case for a larger cage, the cage is steadily enlarged but the ultimate decision to do so or not rest with the owner, who retains the right and capacity to reduce the size of the cage if required.

This basic concept was first used by party veteran Chen Yun to explain how the Communist Party should handle economic policies. But it illustrates well the attitude the Party leadership has adopted since the death of Mao in balancing the need for the Party to retain ultimate control on the one hand, and to allow the reform process sufficient scope to develop so that it can enable China to find its own development model on the other.

With greater self-confidence and increased competence, the Communist Party under Hu is willing to allow greater scope than previously for experimentation in finding ways to enable China develop faster and faster without moving towards developing liberal democracy. Corporatist ideas are taken on board where they appear to work. A larger scope is allowed for civil society to operate as long as the Party feels confident that it can keep civil society in line when and where required. Reinvigoration of Maoist or highly modified Confucian ideas has also been adopted where the Party believes they can enhance the ability of the Party to govern more effectively or to improve its moral authority. But the bottom line remains unchanged - the dominance of the Communist Party, even if intra-party reforms, such as greater 'inner party democracy' may appear to make the top leader more responsive to others than his predecessors. Indeed, the increased scope for debates among party leaders is one of the means through which the Communist Party searches for a Chinese development model.

While the political and developmental approach adopted by the post-Deng leadership is to pre-empt democratization in the Western liberal sense, it does include changes that are commonly seen in democratization. They include expanding good governance practices, allowing for a greater scope for civil liberties and for political participation. In terms of greater political participation the most important general elections in China are not those for the National People's Congress but for the Communist Party's national Congress. At the 17<sup>th</sup> Party



Congress, held in October 2007, the party leadership allowed 15% of nominees to fail to get elected (Thornton, 2008: 8-9). The Chinese government also experimented with township level elections since the turn of the century on the basis of experimentation with village level elections introduced since the 1980s, however limited they might be as genuine democratic exercises (Shi, 2000: 244-6).

The greater emphasis being put on rule by law and improvements in the criminal justice system also means substantial reduction in human rights abuses even though dissidents and political activists are treated no less harshly than under Deng. The substantial improvements come simply by reducing gross abuses that used to be endemic in the criminal justice system because of the poor training and standards of judicial personnel, as distinct from political interference into the judicial system. Such changes should be recognized as they do bring about real improvements to the quality of political life for the general public, even if the primary intention is to strengthen the capacity of the Party to stay in power indefinitely.

### **Applicability elsewhere?**

The apparent success of the approach of the Communist Party post-Deng Xiaoping needs to be put in context. The first factor to take into account is the reality that the Chinese government has not faced any real crisis since 1992 after the aftershocks of the 1989 protests and the subsequent collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union eased, and Deng re-launched the post-Mao reforms. With the economy growing at or nearly at double digit since then the Party appears to have managed to deliver its side of the bargain in the *de facto* social contract put in place after the Tiananmen Massacre - living conditions clearly improved for most though not all. The ability of the top leadership to act collectively despite internal differences and factional struggles also sustains the public belief that the Party has the means and the political will to suppress any challenge to its hold to power. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake merely posed a challenge on governance capacity (which was largely met) but not one against the Party's dominance in the country's politics. The first real test may come, say, after China's economy slows down significantly and over a sustained period or gets into a deep recession, which then sets off a groundswell of social movement and dramatically increased political tension at the top of the leadership.

The other factor that needs to be borne in mind is the fact that the world is in the midst of a China fever. Although the rise of China is real and the progress it has made in the last three decades dramatic, the achievements of China in the last two or three decades have been magnified as they are seen through the perspective of a world infatuated with China. The distorted assessments of China's successes (be they presented as real achievements or heightened threats) have two effects.

To begin with it leads to foreign investors investing more readily in China and thus providing capital, human resources, technical knowhow and other resources to fuel China's rapid economic expansion. This ever increasing injection of foreign capital and resources has so far enabled China to grow quickly without a proportionate increase in manufacturing productivity, though much gain in general productivity has resulted from reallocating resources from inefficient state owned enterprises to more productive uses in the private sector (Morrison, 2008: 5). It also has the effect of further distorting the perception of China's achievements, as success begets success and affects the judgements of almost everyone concerned.

As a result the Communist Party leadership acts with greater confidence and its policies get implemented with relatively little domestic resistance while the outside world increasingly talks of China as the next superpower. This puts China on a virtuous circle in terms of economic development as well as increasing the governance capacity of its government and generating a benign international environment for it to grow.

Will this benign environment hold when the Chinese economy eventually loses momentum and enters a recession? If this should put an end to 'the China fever' it may well lead to a strategic rethink among multi-nationals now heavily invested in China. An end to net inward capital flow or, worse still, a reversal of capital movement can happen with little warning if the psychology underpinning 'the China fever' should end. If so, the scale of the problems that China will face will be magnified, as the virtuous circle can be turned into a vicious circle. The capacity for the reinvigorated Communist Party leadership to deal with such a challenge remains untested.

Thus, while post-Deng governance reforms in China have certainly enhanced the capacity of the Communist Party and the Chinese government to direct economic development, maintain order and keep stability, it is too early to say how effective and sustainable such changes are beyond the foreseeable future. The development model that the post-Deng leadership has devised is merely one that stresses increasing the governance capacity of the ruling Leninist party without changing the nature of the political system. It is one that requires the Communist Party to get its policies on the economy, the politics and the society right most of the time. The built in safety valve to ensure a major policy or economic failure that may have significant negative impact on people's living conditions that exists in a democracy - a change of government via the ballot box - does not exist in the post-Deng model. The only 'safety valve' that exists is nationalism. Apart from diverting public frustration and anger away from the Communist Party and the central government, probably by channelling them against foreign powers or capitalists and blame them for turning the existing benign international environment into a hostile one, what other options are there if the Party should fail to sustain rapid economic growth?

The largely untested nature of the post-Deng approach adhered to by the Communist Party makes this approach unsuitable to be applied elsewhere, particularly since most other countries coming out of strongman politics almost certainly will not enjoy the exceptionally benign international environment produced by the China fever. It is also inherently a risky and difficult to sustain strategy as it requires the power that be to get its main economic, political and social policies right most of the time. This is a tall order that few modern governments can achieve on a sustainable basis. The Singaporean government under the People's Action Party appears to be the only other notable exception apart from post-Deng China, but it is a small city-state and itself a source of inspiration for the post-Deng model.

The scepticism above does not imply that the post-Deng brand of reinvigorated authoritarianism will collapse if it should fail to pass the first big test in the form of a major economic crisis. On the contrary it is likely to survive as it is dominated by an effective, well organized and ruthless Leninist party that is prepared to use whatever means to stay in power and to find out, direct and meet public expectations proactively. It will only collapse if other forces converge with a major economic crisis producing a prolonged political paralysis at the top and a

groundswell of challenges from below that cause a collapse of the regime's legitimacy and make the top leadership unable to respond effectively together. Whether the rise of the new rich in China in the last two decades have produced a genuine middle class with the usual middle class ambitions and proclivity to assert themselves politically remains to be seen. Even if the reinvigorated consultative Leninist state can contain the bottom up social demands in a crisis, a resilient authoritarianism battling to survive is hardly a model for development elsewhere.

For China to become a real model for development it needs to show it will pass real tests it confronts in the future. Be that as it may, this political reality will of course not deter leaders of authoritarian states elsewhere from choosing to cite China as a model in the foreseeable future while it maintains a high rate of growth and brings visible improvements to the living conditions of its people.

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<sup>1</sup> The large public outburst of nationalism when the Olympic torch relay outside of China met with large scale public protests in April 2008 confirms the xenophobic nature of China's new nationalism. This is addressed later in this essay. For a strong representation of some Chinese nationalists' frustrations, see 'My Friends, What Do You Want From Us?' in *China Digital Times*, 12 April 2008, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2008/04/my-friends-what-do-you-want-from-us/> (accessed 16 May 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The fact that Communism itself was an import from Europe was glossed over in China's text books while the 'Sinification' of it under Mao was emphasized so that Communism itself is not generally seen in China as China slavishly borrowing from Europe.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed and critical examination of how Confucianism has been appropriated by governments in different times and context, including in the PRC, see Cecelia Yin-fan Wong, *Confucianism and Democratization* (unpublished Oxford University D.Phil. thesis, 2007).