

The Need for Liberalization in China: Electoral Reform and The People's Congress System

Jessica Chen Weiss

Economic reforms in China over the past twenty-five years have increased the population's standard of living, literacy, and level of personal freedom. At the same time, reforms have generated regional inequality, corruption, and unemployment. Together, these reform-induced trends have increased popular interest in Party affairs and have heightened expectations of the government. Unless the Party center sanctions a venue through which the Chinese people may effectively pursue this growing interest in political participation, the government will find itself increasingly pressed to suppress popular unrest. In order to maintain social stability as it continues to direct the country's economic transformation, the government must foster a set of strong, flexible institutions that will not only smooth the friction between state and society but also direct the political heat into productive channels. I take as my primary example the National People's Congress (NPC), the legislature that began as a "rubber-stamp" for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but that has become an increasingly autonomous and influential body. Due to the rising demand for popular political participation and the increasing need for popular accountability, the Party ought to grant more power to a liberalized people's congress system.

Strains of Economic Reform

Since the inauguration of the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party has been based less upon ideological "correctness" than upon

economic performance. When Deng ended the policy of upholding "whatever" Mao said and did, he replaced it with the imperative of economic growth: to "catch mice," regardless of the stripe and color of reform. Twenty-five years later, these reforms have been responsible for China's rapid development, particularly in rural areas. But the gains of liberalization have not come without costs to stability and the Party's own legitimacy. Despite the fact that the majority continues to support the central government and its reform strategy, a large minority remains dissatisfied with its impact. Andrew J. Nathan writes that "according to a survey carried out by the State Economic Structure Reform Commission in 1997, some 83.9 percent of urban residents approved of the reforms, although only 65.9 percent were satisfied with their results."¹ Deng-era reforms have eroded the egalitarian distribution of wealth and created new divisions of "winners" and "losers" among China's population. Rural inequality, mass layoffs in state-owned enterprises, urban migrants, and the corruption of government officials at most levels of the state bureaucracy are just a few of the factors which continue to feed social discontent. Now that the reforms have begun to affect not only the fringes but also the core of the planned economy, the social costs of adjustment have become more acute and widespread.

Of the reform-induced developments which threaten social stability, unemployment, rural inequality, urban migrants, and corruption are among the most prominent. The restructuring in the late 1990s of state-owned enterprises in grossly inefficient industries, which had been obliged to support excessive numbers of workers,

¹ Burns, John P. "The People's Republic of China at 50: National Political Reform," in *The PRC After 50 Years*, ed. Richard Louis Edmonds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

China new revenues to make up for the decline in funds from collective farming and a tightened budget constraint. In villages where collective enterprises have met financial difficulties, local officials have often saddled peasants with exorbitant informal taxes in order to raise funds for their salaries and administrative purposes.²

The unhappiness caused by these additional burdens has led to an erosion of the Party's legitimacy in many villages.³ On occasion, peasant discontent has broken out into open protest, ranging from small and peaceful demonstrations to large and violent riots, such as those in Renshou county, Sichuan, which involved between ten and fifteen thousand people.⁴ Although peasants have become more politicized than workers, their shows of opposition have been scattered and thus have not presented a major threat to the Center's control. At the same time, however, their exigencies have been considered important enough for the government to respond by allowing village-level elections, widely considered to be a reform adopted to allow peasants to vent their anger.⁵

A third challenge to social stability has been the growth of peasant migrant communities in China's cities, known as the "floating population" that numbers approximately 80 million.⁶ As the household responsibility system freed peasants from working the land, and as agriculture declined as an attractive source of income, ever larger numbers of peasants journeyed to China's cities in search of higher returns to labor. Initially, the growth of markets allowed immigrants without an urban *hukou* to purchase food and other goods necessary to their survival in China's cities. Recently,

reforms of the *hukou* residence system have given some of these sojourners access to basic social services. Nevertheless, many continue to exist at the margins of city life, forming native-place associations and gangs among themselves. Their presence indicates the erosion of horizontal divisions that Mao designed to limit the ability of regions, sectors, and occupations to mount opposition to Party leadership.⁷ By crossing boundaries and defying the government's ability to "mold society into rigid, contradictory categories,"⁸ China's "floating population" is a tangible sign of the government's decreasing ability "to encompass—or even to regulate" – the lives of its citizens.⁹

However destabilizing these effects of reform have been, perhaps the most consequential and adverse impact of the post-Mao reforms has been endemic corruption. Elizabeth J. Perry writes that "in the fall of 1993, Deputy Procurator-General Lian Guoqing acknowledged that corruption was 'worse than at any other period since New China was founded in 1949. It has spread into

the Party, government, administration and every part of society, including politics, economy, ideology and culture."¹⁰ Most scholars explain the sharp increase in corruption by citing the corrosive effect of having political connections in a partially-reformed planned economy. State officials become corrupt either directly by exploiting the resources available to them, "attempting to convert their power into control over economic assets, transforming political into economic capital" -- for instance, the usurpation of peasant income by local cadres—or indirectly by cutting deals with private entrepreneurs, exchanging bureaucratic favors for profit shares.¹¹

“PERHAPS THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL AND ADVERSE IMPACT OF THE POST-MAO REFORMS HAS BEEN ENDEMIC CORRUPTION”

² Schoenhals, Michael. "Political Movements, Change and Stability," in *The PRC After 50 Years*, ed. Richard Louis Emonds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Oi, Jean. "Rural Reform in China," in *The PRC After 50 Years*, ed. Richard Louis Emonds, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Burns, John P. "The People's Republic of China at 50: National Political Reform," in *The PRC After 50 Years*, ed. Richard Louis Emonds, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

⁷ Lieberthal, Kenneth. *Governing China*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 120.

⁸ Solinger, Dorothy. "China's Floating Population," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 239.

⁹ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰ Perry, Elizabeth. "Crime, Corruption, and Contention," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 313.

¹¹ White, Gordon. "Corruption and Market Reform in China," *IDS Bulletin: Liberalization and the New Corruption* 27.2 (1996): 40-47, quoted in Perry, 313.

New Pressures from Below

While giving rise to these new sources of discontent, the reform era has also brought China's populace new resources and capabilities, some of which have been used to circumvent and challenge the government. The end of "class struggle" and political campaigns, marking what Kenneth Lieberthal labels the "decline of ideology," have contributed to a relatively more open climate of opinion. Although the government has granted virtually no freedom of expression, in practice a limited space has opened up periodically for political and social forces to operate independently. Nathan Gardels, writing in the *New Perspectives Quarterly*, has noted that "intellectuals [he knows] have more freedom today to speak their mind among their colleagues and friends than people they know in Singapore and Malaysia – as long as they don't put anything in writing."¹²

Whether the political atmosphere has become more open or not, Tianjian Shi notes an overall increase in political participation, which he correlates with China's rapid economic growth. Referring to modernization theory, Shi writes that "economic development not only increased the contact between individuals and the state but also made certain resources at the individual level, especially education, more important in motivating people to participate in politics."¹³ In post-Mao China, rising education levels, increasing per capita income, exposure to foreign ideas, and greater transparency in government procedures have all fostered political activism. China's citizens have increasingly "gone to trade unions, people's congress delegates, higher governmental organizations, and complaint bureaus to express their opinions."¹⁴

Growing political interest and participation has meant greater demands upon the government at all levels, evidenced by everything from rural peasant riots to the protests of 1989. The numerous occasions on which these woes of

economic adjustment have spilled over into overt demonstrations should signal to the government that new and more successful prosperity schemes will likely be insufficient to reverse the politicization of social unrest. Nathan quotes one intellectual involved in the Tiananmen protests as having said before the June crackdown, "no one is afraid of anyone any more."¹⁵

Not only have citizens' demands grown in number, breadth, and decibel, but Shi finds that the efficacy of government repression has diminished. He writes, "Given the fact that the regime became more repressive after June 4, 1989, the increase in strikes is surprising. It tells us that the authorities failed to prevent people from getting involved in highly forbidden activities even though the regime increased its efforts to suppress unauthorized political expression."¹⁶ Thus, despite government efforts to maintain its control over the political atmosphere in China, its authority continues to fray around the edges. Given the CCP's monopoly on military power, there is little reason to fear that China's leaders will lose control over the country in the near future, except in the event of a sustained economic downturn. Nevertheless, the last two decades of economic reform have generated substantial adjustment costs and swelled the ranks of people interested in, and increasingly capable of, challenging the government's authority.

Toward Political Reform

If the Party desires to maintain greater social stability as it moves ahead with economic reform, avoiding the demoralizing and disruptive cycle of liberalization and retrenchment, it must develop a regularized mechanism with which to respond to the growing demands of the Chinese people. Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko write that "given the existence of substantial reform-induced social stresses—rising crime rates, massive rural emigration, rampant corruption, widening polarization of wealth, and so on — an

¹² Gardels, Nathan. "China: Between a Hard Line and the Hard Rock Café: Rule of Law in China," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 14.3 (1997).

¹³ Shi, Tianjian. "Mass Political Behavior in Beijing," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 159.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁵ Nathan, Andrew J. "Chinese Democracy in 1989: Continuity and Change," *Problems of Communism*, Sept-Oct. 1989, 21.

¹⁶ Shi, 156.

institutionalized capacity for flexible response may be essential to prevent centrifugal forces from overtaxing the system's adaptive capacity."¹⁷ At present, the ability of the Center to consult the people is largely limited to extra-institutional or irregular venues. The most effective way for peasants to gain the government's attention is to disobey.

As reforms create more reason for citizens to complain, while increasing their own personal interest and ability to challenge the government, the Party will face increasing pressure to pursue one of two responses, neither of which is particularly attractive. On the one hand, the government can give in, setting a precedent of weakness and stimulating complaints from other groups. On the other hand, the government can take a hard-line, conservative stance, alienating the protesters and detracting from its popular image. Rather than forcing China's citizens into a "zero-sum winner-take-all confrontation between state and society,"¹⁸ the Party needs to develop a consistent, even institutional, method of incorporating popular opinions into official policy.

Like economic liberalization, political liberalization is a dicey matter in which China's top leaders have demonstrated a strong preference for gradualism. Thus, I do not advocate a "big bang" of democratization but rather a strategy of state-society "entwinement"¹⁹ -- of mutual accommodation and empowerment. As a first step, the government must recognize that it is steadily losing ground in the political arena -- it can have control or legitimacy, but not both -- as I have attempted to show in my discussion of the impact of economic reform. The Party must understand that only by co-opting and responding to citizen demands will it be able to cement its political moorings in the flood of economic change.

The "entwinement" principle behind this strategy may be best pursued through the

strengthening and liberalization of the people's congress system. At present, it is a legislative system that nominally represents the entire population, its influence extending from the local to the national level. Under Mao, it was a "rubber stamp" for central dictates, routinely generating unanimous consent for laws drafted by the Politburo and the State Council. During the reform era, it has begun to acquire greater policymaking influence and autonomy, but liberalization has not moved forward since Deng's first and last electoral reform in 1979, which initiated direct elections at the county level and below. The selection of higher-level deputies is still determined by indirect election, through a consensus of deputies at the next lower level, and even that process is influenced by party membership and standing.

As attractive as an enfeebled legislature may look to top leaders, the gradual liberalization of the people's congress system may hold a key to the Party's long-run success in fostering social stability. Holding government officials accountable to popular vote is the surest way to clean up the corruption endemic to the party and revive its legitimacy. In analyzing why Deng and other top leaders pursued electoral reform in 1979, Murray Scot Tanner writes that one major goal was "to revive the party's deeply wounded legitimacy by granting citizens greater electoral participation and a slightly enhanced choice of candidates."²⁰ In 1979, the wound to the party's legitimacy was the result of the Cultural Revolution. Now, the party suffers from being "perceived as hopelessly corrupt and morally bankrupt"²¹ from the village level all the way to the upper echelons of the CCP. As has taken place in local village elections, however, incremental democratization will combat corruption by promoting popular accountability. In the words of Kevin O'Brien, "offering redress may help placate the discontented and reduce the likelihood of unrest while improving policy implementation and cadre oversight."²² Liberalization of the electorate will allow this process of accommodation to occur more regularly and

¹⁷ Baum, Richard and Alexei Shevchenko. "The 'State of the State,'" in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 360.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tanner, Murray Scot. "The National People's Congress," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 120.

²¹ Schoenhals, 41.

²² O'Brien, Kevin. "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49.1 (1996): 45.

smoothly, providing a built-in mechanism that will diffuse any social tensions generated by new economic reforms.

The destabilizing ramifications of premature liberalization have been formalized in Samuel Huntington's claim that "when social mobilization exceeds political institutionalization, disorder and praetorianism may result."²³ Unlike the Soviet Union, however, China's form of government has always been relatively decentralized and has become more so with the fiscal decentralization necessary for market reform. The result of granting more power and autonomy to lower levels of the state hierarchy has been the increasing ability of local cadres to evade the reach of central policy directives, as evidenced by widespread corruption. "Concomitantly, the local government has surpassed the central government in its influence over citizens' lives, as Shi has noted.²⁴

This decentralization of political authority may actually allow central planners to engineer a gradual political liberalization wherein the first impact of democratic accountability falls upon local government cadres—which would bolster the position of the Center in its tug-of-war with local state government. My claim that popular accountability may help the top leadership restore party discipline at the lower levels and solidify the Center's popular influence is supported by an extension of Kevin O'Brien's conception of "rightful resistance," defined within the context of center-local relations as "a form of popular contention... [that] employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful [party center] to curb [local governments'] political or economic power."²⁵

O'Brien's analysis shows how villagers have employed central policy mandates to chide local officials, even absent an institutionalized avenue for political redress. He writes that when local cadres evade the letter of the law handed down by central authorities, "eagle-eyed villagers are quick to step

in and to accuse them of engaging in prohibited behavior." He cites villagers as saying, "Central policy says that after farmers fulfill their contractual obligations, we can sell our grain freely on the market; why don't you obey? If you don't listen to the Center, then we won't listen to you.... Why do you always oppose the Center? Why do you always oppose us? Are you cadres of the Communist Party?"²⁶ This confrontation illustrates how peasant protest has actually enhanced the legitimacy of central policy by holding it up to lesser officials as if it were, in effect, the law of the land.

Although O'Brien's fieldwork primarily addresses the actions of discontented villagers, the strategy of rightful resistance and its legitimizing influence upon official symbolism may apply to all marginalized groups seeking redress. The protests of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation in May 1989 also placed their criticism within a Communist framework: "The gnawed bones they [the officials] throw out are the compensation that we, the working class, get. In today's socialist society, can we the working class

WITH ELECTORAL REFORM ... THE CENTER CAN ENHANCE ITS OWN POPULAR IMAGE WHILE STRENGTHENING THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AS A WHOLE IF IT GRANTS CITIZENS A CENTRALLY-SANCTIONED MANDATE TO CURB LOCAL CADRE CORRUPTION.

allow them to treat us this way?"²⁷ This symbolic exchange represents the larger accommodation envisioned by the strategy of "entwinement." By invoking officially-approved Marxist ideology, the workers benefit because they enhance the legitimacy of their goals, while the state benefits from renewed popular belief in its ideology. Extending this logic to the electoral reform of the people's congress system, the Center can enhance its own popular image while strengthening the political system as a whole if it grants citizens a centrally-sanctioned mandate to curb local cadre corruption.

The only parameter for this positive-sum condition is that the actors share a common conception of the symbolic instrument at hand. Terms such as "socialist" and "democratic" can become obstacles to mutual accommodation if political leaders and popular demagogues hold

²³ Tanner, 127.

²⁴ Shi, pp. 149-50.

²⁵ O'Brien, 33.

²⁶ O'Brien, 37.

²⁷ Perry, 317.

conflicting definitions, as was true of party leaders and student protesters during the Tiananmen protests. For students, democracy at the very least meant regular “dialogue” and freedom of press. For Deng Xiaoping, democracy was an “instrument of mobilization whose function is to strengthen the links of citizens to the state, rather than a set of procedures for limiting state power.”²⁸ So long as each side maintained these conflicting definitions of democracy, neither benefited from stalemate—indeed, the discord served to empower extremists within both camps.

Fortunately, electoral reform is not inconsistent with this particular definition of democracy, which Deng supported, if we consider that through the principle of “rightful resistance” the links between citizens and the Center will indeed be strengthened, even at the expense of local cadres’ power. After the liberalization of the people’s congress system, other conflicts of symbolic import may then be solved through the regular debate and compromise characteristic of an institutional setting.

Several specific reforms will serve to liberalize the people’s congress system. The Election Law should be revised to extend direct elections to higher-level people’s congresses, beginning with the provinces. New strategies for assigning delegate quotas should begin to accommodate marginalized sectors of the population. Restraints on campaigning should be loosened to allow candidates who do not enjoy the favor of local cadres to stand a chance for office. Furthermore, central leaders can begin to formalize the process of popular “consultation” at the county level and below. By sanctioning official avenues through which citizens can communicate with their elected delegates, the Center can steer local politics away from the bribes and favors of patrimonialism, which currently pervades delegate-constituent relationships at the grass-roots level.²⁹

Concomitantly, electoral reform must be accompanied by the protection of the legislature’s growing institutional power. The political ideas and strategies of NPC Standing Committee leaders have been instrumental so far in expanding the role of the people’s congress system, achieving more

influence for the National People’s Congress over the policymaking agenda, the content of draft laws, and bureaucratic oversight. As liberalization begins to move forward, however, the NPC leaders will have to focus their energies upon protecting the legislature’s institutional power from leaders within the Politburo and the State Council, who might “threaten to use their executive and coercive power, à la Yeltsin, to close down the NPC if they feel threatened by it.”³⁰ Absent a significant restructuring of national political power, NPC leaders will continue to confront a lopsided institutional environment in which executive leaders reign supreme.

Conclusion

The economic reforms begun under Deng Xiaoping have unleashed new social and political forces that the central government would do well to accommodate if it wishes to preserve social stability and its own legitimacy. Deng Xiaoping launched a kite that is flying high, but the winds of economic change blow now more strongly than ever, straining the ties which bind the Party to society. To keep the kite in the sky and allow it to fly higher, the Center must let more line out, feeding the reforms with continued liberalization. The longer the line grows, however, the stronger must be the ties that allow the party to direct the country’s progress. As the government adopts reforms that push the country’s market transition closer to completion, it must prepare for the social strains that these adjustments will inevitably produce. The reform of China’s institutions thus becomes essential, both to cushion the costs of economic adjustment and to channel the social and political fallout of reform away from the Center. Electoral reform presents the swiftest path to cleaning up cadre corruption by promoting popular accountability. Given China’s unique configuration of central-local power, top party leaders may be able to control the dynamics of democratization in order to solidify their own authority while simultaneously rooting out corruption from below.

²⁸ Nathan, 18.

²⁹ Tanner, 124.

³⁰ Tanner, 127-8.