

THE EAST IS AUTHORITARIAN: WHY CHINA WILL NOT DEMOCRATISE

The Chinese Communist Party may carve out an enduring place for its own brand of accountable authoritarianism, argues **Benjamin Herscovitch**

As the Soviet empire entered its death throes and the Iron Curtain crumbled across Eastern Europe in 1989, the institutions and ideas of free societies and markets seemed irrepressible. Typifying the ebullient mood among the world's liberal elites, Francis Fukuyama speculated that we were witnessing nothing short of 'an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.'¹ The 'end of history' had arrived; politically and economically, there was 'nothing else towards which we could expect to evolve.'² The 'occurrence of events, even large and grave events,' had obviously not come to an end.³ But liberal democracy had emerged as the global gold standard of political legitimacy, while capitalism was clearly the most effective economic system for securing humanity's material wellbeing.

With the Tiananmen Square protests galvanising students, workers and intellectuals across China against authoritarian communist rule in the spring of 1989, the country appeared poised to join the community of liberal democratic nations. But China's democratic spring proved short lived. The long authoritarian winter quickly returned as the People's Liberation Army moved on the protestors. Since then, the heavy hand of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has kept China firmly under authoritarian one-party rule. Almost 25 years after the 4 June massacre, the CCP still controls the judiciary, censors the Internet, and keeps more than 1,400 political activists behind bars.⁴ Nor does Beijing hesitate to muzzle free speech and repress restive ethnic minority provinces into submission.⁵

The CCP's monopolisation of political power—secured with the barrel of a gun, in characteristically Maoist fashion—partly explains China's enduring authoritarianism.⁶ And yet the way China has bucked the trend of global democratisation also has an essential human dimension. It is distilled in the story of an anonymous 'everyman' citizen—Mr X.⁷

In 1989, Mr X was a young and idealistic university student. He was in Tiananmen Square, dodging bullets and risking life and limb for democracy and freedom. Less than 25 years later, he has a spacious apartment in a middle-class suburb. He also has a wife and children, and drives a European car. Today, if Mr X were asked about democracy in China, he would just shrug his shoulders. Mr X certainly wants less corruption, fewer smog-choked days, and better public services. But he is in no mood to be in the firing line again in the name of regime change. Despite the CCP's rule being a daily insult to democracy, Mr X would say the regime has made him relatively comfortable and content.

It may be reassuring to assume that Mr X's story is not representative and that China's authoritarian political system will



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be forced to ‘democratise or die.’⁸ This reflects the broadly accepted view that a rapidly expanding middle-class will demand more accountability and political freedom, while economic, social, environmental and political problems born of institutional inflexibility will make democratic reforms essential.⁹ As we will see, not only is this assessment out of step with Chinese attitudes and aspirations, but it also misjudges the internal workings of CCP rule.

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China’s reluctant democrats

Although South Korea and Taiwan democratised as their economies boomed and their respective middle-classes ballooned, authoritarian rule was overthrown largely thanks to the efforts of workers and students.¹⁰ Like its South Korean and Taiwanese counterparts, the available evidence suggests that the Chinese middle-class will not be at the forefront of any democratic movements.¹¹

Using data collected in Beijing, Chengdu and Xi’an, academics Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu found that more than 90% of middle-class Chinese support protecting the right to work, education, free information, privacy of personal correspondence, and travel abroad, while more than 80% support protecting the right to reside anywhere in the country and worship freely.¹² Notwithstanding an appetite for individual rights and freedoms, the Chinese middle-class’ interest in political rights and freedoms is lukewarm.¹³ As much as 75% of the Chinese middle-class think they do not need to participate in government decision-making, and only 25% say multiple parties should be able to contest elections.¹⁴ Furthermore, 86% of middle-class Chinese respect China’s political system and 83% believe the CCP represents their interests, while only 24% and 23% respectively support the formation of citizens’ non-governmental organisations or ‘disruptive’ demonstrations.¹⁵

Overall, the majority of middle-class Chinese are ‘neither interested in democratic institutions,

such as the fully competitive election of leaders without restriction on political parties, nor enthusiastic about participating in government affairs and politics.’¹⁶ With one-party rule entrenched in China, the country certainly suffers from what David Marquand called a ‘democratic deficit,’ and yet it seems to cause little disquiet among middle-class Chinese.¹⁷

Why is China’s middle-class largely indifferent towards democracy? In part, this is a product of the middle-class’ dependence on the state.¹⁸ As well as overseeing the emergence of the socioeconomic environment that created China’s massive new middle-class in the last 40 years, the CCP provides middle-class Chinese with jobs and career opportunities within the state apparatus.¹⁹ In Chen and Lu’s survey, ‘a majority (about 60 percent) of middle-class respondents were employed in the state apparatus,’ and, not surprisingly, there is a significant ‘negative correlation between employment in the state apparatus and support for democracy and democratization.’²⁰ This means that ‘China’s authoritarian leaders have ensured that the middle classes’ future is tied to the Party’s’: The CCP has engineered the rise of the middle-class through 35 years of economic reforms and continues to offer public sector salaries to many middle-income Chinese.²¹ Far from being a force for democratisation, the CCP’s successful co-opting of China’s emerging middle-class has made it what China expert Jonathan Unger calls a ‘bulwark of the current regime’ blocking the path to democracy.²²

Not only is the Chinese middle-class unlikely to be an agent for regime change, but the average Chinese is not in the mood to rebel against the political system. There is a significant negative correlation between satisfaction with social and economic position and support for democracy within China’s general population.²³ This implies that there will be less support for democratic change if the public is content with China’s social and economic conditions. Given how comfortable and optimistic the Chinese are, broad-based calls for democratisation are a remote prospect.

The Chinese are more likely than any public in the 2012 Pew Global Attitudes Survey to say they are better off than their parents, while China is the

world leader in hope for the future on a composite index of optimism.²⁴ Added to this, 72% of Chinese say they are satisfied with national conditions, and 76% expect to improve their position in society over the next five years.²⁵ With the Chinese economy expected to expand at approximately 7% annually in 2013 and 2014, and many analysts predicting that this growth rate will continue until 2023, Chinese optimism is probably well founded.²⁶ Even if government-dependent employees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) become a smaller constituency as a result of economic liberalisation and a growing private sector, continued economic expansion would still provide a powerful rationale for the political status quo.

Accountable authoritarianism

Added to widespread satisfaction with government, the CCP has the will and wherewithal to pursue a reformist agenda necessary to consolidate its power and secure its political survival. The CCP might be avowedly authoritarian, but it is also a ‘Darwinian Leninist Party.’²⁷ As former leader Deng Xiaoping hinted, the guiding philosophy of the CCP’s authoritarianism is not communism but evolution through pragmatic reform: ‘It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.’²⁸

China’s economic revival over the last 35 years offers a particularly striking testament to the CCP’s pragmatic reformism. In 1976, when Mao Zedong died, the Chinese economy was contracting by 1.6% annually and GDP per capita was a paltry US\$163.²⁹ Determined to dismantle the most suffocating elements of Maoist central planning, the reform-minded Deng de-collectivised agricultural production and created business-friendly special economic zones. Since Deng launched China’s real Great Leap Forward, the economy has experienced uninterrupted expansion, annual economic growth has averaged 10%, and GDP per capita has risen to more than US\$5,500.³⁰

Notwithstanding the scale and success of Deng’s economic liberalisation, the CCP’s reformism is neither restricted to economic policy nor showing signs of subsiding. The CCP not only continues to use repression and violence to

cement its grip on government, but also shows genuine resolve to improve the quality of public policy by clamping down on corruption, overhauling the unpopular system of forced land expropriations, tackling chronic pollution, and reducing income inequality.

Acknowledging that corruption poses a ‘severe challenge’ to CCP rule and must be combatted for ‘the party and the country,’ President Xi Jinping’s administration has launched an Internet-based platform for ‘netizens’ to report cases of corruption.³¹ Although selective and at least partly motivated by internal jockeying for political power in the party leadership, the CCP has also pursued a series of high-profile corruption investigations against senior officials.³² These anti-graft initiatives come on the back of a revised land management law stipulating that farmers be paid ‘fair’ market value for their land to minimise exploitation by officials who acquire farmland cheaply and sell it at a massive mark-up to businesses.³³ The CCP’s 2011–15 five-year plan also includes spending commitments worth more than US\$350 billion to reduce pollution by limiting coal consumption, reducing water and air contamination, and restricting the use of high-polluting vehicles.³⁴ With income inequality falling slightly in recent years—China’s GINI coefficient of income inequality has dropped from 0.51 in 2010 to 0.49 in 2012—there are even tentative signs that the CCP will live up to its longstanding commitment to narrow the yawning gap between rich and poor.³⁵

CCP rule is a form of ‘accountable authoritarianism’: The party will reform public policy where necessary to respond to public concerns and adapt to new economic, political and social challenges, while also jealously guarding its position of unrivalled political power.

Clean government, land management, and environmental and social policy initiatives will face stiff resistance from vested interests. Nevertheless, like Deng’s spectacularly effective economic liberalisation, these reforms show that the CCP is not a rigid and doctrinaire organisation. The

CCP is authoritarian and will not countenance any challenge to one-party rule. But it is also willing to abandon past ideological verities, pull vested interests off the public teat, and undertake necessary reforms to consolidate its power and safeguard its political survival. This makes the CCP rule a form of ‘accountable authoritarianism’: The party will reform public policy where necessary to respond to public concerns and adapt to new economic, political and social challenges, while also jealously guarding its position of unrivalled political power.³⁶

The long-term political survival of the CCP depends on making the one-party state broadly responsive to the concerns of citizens.

An alternative route to the end of history?

The Chinese public’s democratic indifference and the CCP’s pragmatic reformism point to a great irony in contemporary China: Accountability will be the key to the indefinite survival of China’s authoritarian one-party state. Although the CCP is authoritarian and will not tolerate any challenge to its grip on government, the party is also savvy enough to know that bolstering its power and staving off popular dissatisfaction requires initiatives to mitigate economic, social, environmental and political problems. This entails that the long-term political survival of the CCP depends on making the one-party state broadly responsive to the concerns of citizens.

Therein lies the moral of Mr X’s story: Mr X is no longer interested in genuine liberal democracy, yet he wants better public policy that will curb corruption, clean up the environment, and clamp down on maladministration. The CCP might be able to count on Mr X’s democratic indifference for the moment. But unless the party is able to show Mr X that government is broadly responsive to his needs and aspirations, he might once again become an agent for regime change.

In 1998, US President Bill Clinton castigated Beijing on its failure to live up to liberal ideals by suggesting that the regime was ‘on the wrong side of history.’³⁷ This was certainly true of the CCP’s brutal, bloody and intellectually bankrupt Maoist

past. But by continuing to pursue a moderate reformist agenda within the framework of one-party rule, the CCP may yet carve out an enduring place at the end of history for its own brand of accountable authoritarianism.³⁸

Endnotes

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’ *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), 3.
- 2 As above, 4, 5, 18; Francis Fukuyama, ‘History beyond the end,’ *The Australian* (9 October 2001), 15.
- 3 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), xii, 3, 55.
- 4 Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World 2013: China,’ www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/china; Anonymous, ‘China’s Holistic Censorship Regime,’ *Far Eastern Economic Review* 171:4 (May 2008); Rowan Callick, *Party Time: Who Runs China and How* (Collingwood: Black Inc, 2013), xii.
- 5 Chris Buckley, ‘Crackdown on bloggers is mounted by China,’ *The New York Times* (10 September 2013); ‘Online rumours like Cultural Revolution denunciation posters, says party journal,’ *South China Morning Post* (16 September, 2013); Julie Makinen, ‘Death toll in Xinjiang violence rises to at least 35,’ *The Los Angeles Times* (28 June 2013); ‘Xinjiang violence: Two sentenced to death in China,’ *BBC News* (13 August 2013); Andrew Jacobs, ‘Uighurs in China say bias is growing,’ *The New York Times* (7 October 2013); ‘Chinese police fire on unarmed Tibetan protesters in Driru,’ *Radio Free Asia* (7 October 2013).
- 6 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of War and Strategy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), 14.
- 7 Mr X’s story reflects key details from the life of a living Chinese citizen whose name and background are not revealed to guarantee his security.
- 8 Yasheng Huang, ‘Democratize or Die: Why China’s Communists Face Reform or Revolution,’ *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013).
- 9 See, for example, Dali L. Yang, ‘China’s Long March to Freedom,’ *Journal of Democracy* 18:3 (July 2007), 63; Minxin Pei, ‘How Will China Democratize?’ *Journal of Democracy* 18:3 (July 2007), 55; Cheng Li and Minxin Pei, ‘Li vs. Pei on China’s prospects for political reform,’ *The Wall Street Journal* (8 November 2012); Minxin Pei, ‘Great party, but where’s the communism?’ *The New York Times* (30 June 2011); Jamil Anderlini, ‘How Long Can the Communist Party Survive in China?’ *Financial Times Magazine* (20 September 2013). In a similar vein, Fukuyama argued in a recent opinion piece that the ‘potential mismatch between expectations and opportunities for China’s new middle class’ will conspire to make the Chinese political model unsustainable.

- See Francis Fukuyama, 'The rise of China's middle class,' *The Australian Financial Review* (16 August 2013).
- 10 Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, 'Middle Class Rising?' *Why Nations Fail* (2 July 2013); David Martin Jones, 'Democratization, Civil Society, and Illiberal Middle Class Culture in Pacific Asia,' *Comparative Politics* 30:2 (January 1998), 147.
 - 11 There are limitations on how accurate any picture of the attitudes and aspirations of individuals living under authoritarian regimes can be. Pollsters will often be unable to ask questions freely, respondents may be reluctant to answer honestly, and the understanding of key democratic values and procedures may differ.
 - 12 Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, 'Democratization and the Middle Class in China: The Middle Class's Attitudes Toward Democracy,' *Political Research Quarterly* 64:3 (September 2011), 707.
 - 13 As above.
 - 14 As above, 709–710. Although almost 70% of middle-class Chinese are in favour of multi-candidate elections for government officials, they are comfortable with all the candidates representing the CCP. See as above, 710.
 - 15 Jie Chen, *A Middle Class Without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 71, 83.
 - 16 As above, 90.
 - 17 David Marquand, *Parliament For Europe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 65.
 - 18 Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, 'Democratization and the Middle Class in China,' as above, 712.
 - 19 As above, 713; Kellee S. Tsai, 'China's Complicit Capitalists,' *Far Eastern Economic Review* 171:1 (January/February 2008), 15.
 - 20 Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, 'Democratization and the Middle Class in China,' as above, 713, 715; See also John Lee, *Putting Democracy in China on Hold*, Issue Analysis 95 (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2008), 15.
 - 21 John Lee, *Putting Democracy in China on Hold*, as above, 15.
 - 22 Jonathan Unger, 'China's Conservative Middle Class,' *Far Eastern Economic Review* 169:3 (April 2006), 28, 31; Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 266.
 - 23 Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, 'Democratization and the Middle Class in China,' as above, 715.
 - 24 Pew Research Center, *Growing Concerns in China About Inequality, Corruption* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012), 7; Pew Research Center, *China's Optimism* (2005), 3.
 - 25 Pew Research Center, *China's Optimism*, as above, 3, 5.
 - 26 'IMF cuts global growth outlook,' *South China Morning Post* (9 October 2013); 'World Bank sees slower growth in China, East Asia,' *South China Morning Post* (8 October 2013); David Llewellyn-Smith, 'China's bears and raging bulls,' *The Age* (25 September 2013).
 - 27 Nicholas Bequelin, 'The Limits of the Party's Adaptation,' *Far Eastern Economic Review* 172:10 (December 2010), 47.
 - 28 'Deng Xiaoping,' *BBC News* (2003).
 - 29 World Bank, 'Data,' <http://data.worldbank.org/>.
 - 30 As above.
 - 31 'CPC to maintain high pressure on corruption,' *Xinhuanet* (5 August 2013); 'Party discipline agency opens official website,' *Xinhuanet* (2 September 2013); 'Party discipline agency vows timely exposure of corruption,' *Xinhuanet* (12 September 2013).
 - 32 Benjamin Herscovitch, 'China's Icarus sheds light on the limits of the law,' *Ideas@The Centre* 9:38 (September 2013); 'Jiang Jiemin: China sacks former energy chief,' *BBC News* (3 September 2013). A death sentence with a two-year reprieve in the case of Liu Zhijun, the former railways minister who was found guilty of accepting more than US\$10 million worth of bribes from 1986 to 2011, is typical of Beijing's attempt to be taken seriously on anti-corruption. See Yang Jingjie, 'Liu gets "suspended death",' *Global Times* (9 July 2013).
 - 33 James Pomfret, 'China village seethes over land grabs as Beijing mulls new laws,' *Reuters* (7 March 2013).
 - 34 Tom Phillips, 'China invests £235 billion to tackle pollution,' *The Telegraph* (28 August 2012); Edward Wong, 'China's plan to curb air pollution sets limits on coal use and vehicles,' *The New York Times* (12 September 2013); 'Beijing toughens pollution rules to clean up air,' *Xinhuanet* (2 September 2013).
 - 35 Zhang Hong, 'China's income inequality slowly improving, survey finds,' *South China Morning Post* (19 July 2013); Wang Xiaolu, 'Measuring the width of the wealth gap,' *Caixin Online* (23 September 2013); Bob Davis and Tom Orlik, 'Beijing plan signals reform to come quick,' *The Wall Street Journal* (6 February 2013).
 - 36 For a fuller explanation of the Chinese model of accountable authoritarianism, see Benjamin Herscovitch, *Accountable Authoritarianism: Why China's Democratic Deficit Will Last*, Foreign Policy Analysis 8 (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2013).
 - 37 Michael Elliott, 'Beyond History's Shadow,' *Newsweek* (1998).
 - 38 Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' as above, 4.