Reclaiming Legitimacy in China

HEIKE HOLBIG
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

BRUCE GILLEY
Portland State University

The contemporary politics of China reflect an ongoing effort by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to reclaim the right to rule in light of the consequences of economic development, international pressures, and historical change. China's regime stands out within the Asian region for its success in the effort of adapting to change and ensuring its continuity. Focusing on changes in China's elite discourse during the reform period and particularly during the last decade, the aim of this article is to elaborate the relative importance of various sources of legitimacy as they are shifting over time, as well as inherent dilemmas and limitations. There is evidence of an agile, responsive, and creative party effort to relegitimate the postrevolutionary regime through economic performance, nationalism, ideology, culture, governance, and democracy. At the same time, the study finds a clear shift in emphasis from an earlier economic-nationalistic approach to a more ideological-institutional approach.

Keywords: China, Legitimacy, Economic Growth, Ideology, Governance, Democracy.

La política contemporánea China refleja un esfuerzo sostenido del Partido Comunista Chino por continuar ejerciendo el derecho de gobernar a la luz de las consecuencias del desarrollo económico, las presiones internacionales, y el cambio histórico. El régimen Chino se destaca dentro de la región de Asia por su éxito en el esfuerzo de adaptarse al cambio y asegurar su continuidad. Centrándonos en los cambios en el discurso de la elite China durante el periodo de reforma y particularmente durante la última década, el objetivo de este artículo es el de detallar la relativa importancia de las diferentes fuentes de legitimidad y sus variaciones en el tiempo, así como los dilemas y limitaciones inherentes. Existe evidencia de un esfuerzo ágil, sensible y creativo para relegitimar el régimen post-revolucionario a partir del desempeño económico, el nacionalismo, la ideología, la cultura, un buen gobierno, y la democracia. De la misma forma, este estudio encuentra

un cambio claro en el énfasis del régimen de un enfoque económico-nacionalista a uno ideológico-institucional.

The contemporary politics of China reflect an ongoing effort by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to reclaim the right to rule in light of the consequences of economic development, international pressures, and historical change. China stands out within the Asian region for the relative success the regime has achieved in that effort. While the CCP does face challenges to its legitimacy, those challenges are, for the most part, defeated by regime claims. In some respects, China is a classically Asian case: a democratic opposition struggles against the rational-legal and economic performance claims of the regime.

In popular and even many academic discussions, the reasons for regime legitimacy in China are reduced to two main factors: economic growth and nationalism. "China's regime retains authority by means of patriotism and performance-based legitimacy" says Roskin (2009, 426). Pan (2008, 323) writes that "[t]he government has grown expert at . . . rallying nationalist sentiment to its side . . . [while] the extended boom has enhanced the party's reputation." Laliberté and Lanteigne (2008, 8) write that the CCP's claims to legitimacy "in a nutshell, are encapsulated in the notion that only the CCP is able to ensure economic growth, provide social stability, and defend national sovereignty."

There is a good factual basis for this claim: the importance attached to economic growth and nationalism has remained high in a World Values Survey (WVS) question asking people to cite "the most important goal for the country," accounting for a combined 73 percent of responses in 2007 (down slightly from 87 percent when the question was first asked in 1990). Yet a closer examination of the search for legitimacy in China reveals the importance of two additional clusters of legitimacy sources: (1) ideology and the collective social values that it supports as well as, more recently, culturalism; and (2) governance, including the ways in which the regime has been able to define the terms "democracy" and "human rights" in ways that support its existing performance and values.

We do not challenge the importance of growth and of nationalism. However, we believe that they are insufficient to explain the legitimation of the CCP regime. The key to the party's search for legitimacy, we claim, lies in understanding its ability to construct and influence the subjective values and meanings against which its performance is measured. There has been a clear shift in emphasis from the economic-nationalistic approach to an ideological-institutional approach.

Legitimacy in History

The legitimacy of the CCP has always been contested and often rejected explicitly by significant portions of China's population. The civil war that preceded the CCP's victory in 1949 reflected a profoundly divided population. Eastman (1984, 88) described the situation as "little . . . support . . . on the

Nationalist side; some . . . support . . . on the Communist side." Millions fled from China (including one million to Hong Kong alone, of whom 385,000 remained by 1954) rather than submit to communist authority. Peterson (2008, 172) calls the flight from communist rule in China "one of the largest refugee flows in world history." Within the country, rebel counterinsurgencies continued until 1951 in Han areas. Anti-CCP insurgents captured 31 of 79 county capitals in the southwest province of Guizhou in 1950 before finally being crushed in "bandit suppression" campaigns by the end of 1951 (Brown 2007, 114). Tibet and Xinjiang were subdued by force.

In its earliest years, from 1949-56, it is generally assumed (although elusive to prove) that the People's Republic of China (PRC) successfully established its legitimacy through revolutionary ideology and myths, and through concrete performance—ending civil conflict, controlling inflation, and rebuilding the economy. With the excesses of the anti-rightist campaign of 1956, rising inner-party conflicts, and then the disastrous Great Leap Famine of 1959-61, that legitimacy began to ebb. The internecine violence of the Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, further degraded CCP legitimacy, despite Mao's hopes that it would reinvigorate social support. By 1976, party leaders believed that the party's popular standing was at an all-time low.

The reform era, and particularly the revival of reforms after the Tiananmen Crackdown in 1989 with its devastating effects on party legitimacy, can be seen as an attempt to rebuild legitimacy along postrevolutionary lines. The motivations were primarily domestic. This effort accelerated with the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. Other external events—the rise of human rights interventionism, the Kuomintang's loss of power in Taiwan in 2000, and entry into the World Trade Organization—are variously cited by Chinese party analysts in explaining the heightened attention to the party's moral authority over society. No less important, the changing nature of Chinese society—the development of a large private sector, the disappearance of an industrial proletariat, and sharp intergenerational shifts in values—put the party on guard.

The quest for legitimacy was made explicit in 2004 when the party admitted in a document following a high-level plenum that: "[t]he party's governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all" (Resolution 2004, 1154). As a member of the Shanghai party committee research arm put it: "[t]hat statement contained within it a profound historical lesson that we learned from the Soviet collapse, namely that if we do not . . . prevent and overcome the threat of legitimacy crisis, living only by the old dictum that 'anyone can rule by force alone' then it is not inconceivable that we will follow the same path as the Soviet Union" (Zhou 2006, 250-1). Shambaugh (2008, 124) calls the 2004 declaration "probably the most important" party document since the 1978 plenum decision that launched the reform movement.

In the years that followed, an intensive debate emerged within the party's intellectuals on the explicit question of legitimacy. The number of articles on the

question of party legitimacy in a representative sample of 36 party school journals rose from just 14 in 2002 to a peak of 84 in 2006. Only a few scattered voices among hard-line party ideologues pointed out that Marxist parties should *by definition* not be debating their own legitimacy because "raising the question of whether China should still be led by the CCP" could have "serious negative consequences" (Xin 2005, 53). This in turn has provided the basis for a constant and restless striving to adjust, change, modify, and sometimes radically alter aspects of public policy and state institutions in order to conform to the perceived demands of legitimacy. Reclaiming legitimacy is at the center of contemporary Chinese politics.

After a brief outline of the historical dimension of the CCP's legitimacy and a discussion of the various levels of legitimacy in China, the article will analyze the various sources of legitimacy. Focusing on developments during the reform period and particularly during the last decade, the aim is to elaborate the relative importance of these sources shifting over time as well as inherent dilemmas and limitations.

Legitimacy Levels

Most measurements find that in the post-1989 period, the party had succeeded in rebuilding its popular legitimacy. Gilley (2006), using both attitudinal and behavioral data at the aggregate level, finds that China was a "high legitimacy" state in comparative perspective in the late 1990s to early 2000s, ranking thirteenth out of 72 states considered, and second in Asia only to Taiwan. Other quantitative measures report similar results (Chen 2004; Wang 2005).

Such findings are based on mean-centered models of measurement. However, the CCP's own attempts to measure its legitimacy, like those of the former East Germany or of Stalin himself, tend toward a more disaggregated micro-level approach that is more concerned with variance. Based upon observations about how it deals with seemingly insignificant "mass incidents" and how it studies their potential effects, the CCP appears to look for nodes of legitimacy crisis, in both social and geographic spaces, perhaps on the view that delegitimation can occur quickly as a result of "mass incidents" or other forms of mass mobilization triggering a cascade of preference shifts (Zhang 2009).

In this alternative approach, legitimacy is not a single continuous variable with a mean value whose implications can be linked in a linear manner to the probability of system-threatening behavior. Rather it is a cluster of variables whose means *and* variances can be linked in a Bayesian or "fuzzy set" manner of conditional probabilities to system-threatening behavior. In other words, the CCP *perceives* that different combinations of factors with different critical values might interact to suddenly and radically alter the overall level of legitimacy, causing system-threatening events. The wife of former party general secretary Jiang Zemin commented that his desk was covered in reports of

behaviors that might be considered evidence of legitimacy deficits: "[e]xplosions here, rioting there. Murders, corruption, terrorism—little that was nice" (Kuhn 2004, 266).

The CCP's perception of the brittleness of high mass legitimacy is not unreasonable. In a country the size of China, one should engage in substantive geographical (which region?), institutional (which institutions?), and popular (which groups?) complexification (Schubert 2008, 196). When one does this, one recognizes that China has *both* high overall legitimacy *and* serious legitimacy fissures if only because of its size and complexity. If high national average legitimacy can easily crumble in the face of a particular localized crisis, then China's size and complexity as a nation suggest the party is right to be worried about even seemingly minor threats to its legitimacy.

China's official bluebook on social development for 2005, for instance, found that political support among rural dwellers declined from 50 percent for the central party-state to 25, 5, 2, and 1 percent for the next four levels of authority (provincial, city, county, and township). This is a reversal of the standard pattern in most countries where legitimacy is highest for the level of government that people are closest to (Li 2008; Yu 2005). In terms of particular subjects, specific groups, such as adherents to the Falun Gong, petitioners who feel wronged by state actions, alienated members of minority groups like Tibetans and Uighurs, and rights defender groups like the Beijing Lawyers Association, represent significant pockets of legitimation failure. Central Party School researcher Zhu Lingjun notes that the party's expansion of its popular base has left workers feeling "suspicious" of its legitimacy (Zhu 2006).

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

The Conundrum of Economic Growth

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

There is a view widely shared among analysts in China that economic growth in particular, while providing a short-term fillip to party legitimacy, was,

like revolutionary legitimacy, bound to be exhausted. This was because it is generating its own problems (inequalities, environmental degradation, and so on); because it is creating rising expectations; and because it is fueling shifts in social values and political culture. Indeed, Chinese elites have worried for years about the fleeting nature of economic success, which is aggravated by the increasing dependence on the global market. Samuel Huntington's "King's dilemma," translated as "performance dilemma" (*zhengji kunju*), was borrowed as starting point for a critical analysis of the first two decades of economic reforms. It was argued that party rule would come under growing pressure as the satisfaction of material needs would breed nonmaterial ones, such as demands for political participation and pluralization, and as social inequalities fueled a sense of injustice (Gilley and Holbig 2009).

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

The Chinese elites' reaction toward the recent global financial and economic crisis is a striking example of the role of framing. Initially, when the financial crisis hit the U.S. economy and started to spread across regional markets, Chinese economists put forward a "de-coupling thesis." Supported by various international commentators, they argued that China, thanks to the leadership's earlier wise reluctance to fully liberalize their banking system and the exchange rate regime, had maintained sound finances and would not easily fall prey to the global crisis. Scholars from the "New Left" who gloated that the collapse of Wall Street highlighted the shortcomings of American-style capitalism were received well (Zheng and Lye 2008). When the global economic crisis eventually hit China in September 2008 via a sharp decline in western demand for Chinese exports, the financial authorities were quick to signal their resoluteness to tackle the crisis by reducing domestic interest rates, reserve ratios, and deposit and lending rates. In the face of damages caused for China's coastal export firms, surging job losses, and the ensuing risks of social instability, Wen Jiabao announced a four trillion yuan (US$560 billion) stimulus package in November to be spent for infrastructure projects, reconstruction work in earthquake regions of Sichuan province, technological innovation, environmental

protection, and social welfare measures (Schueller 2009). Rhetorically, the announcement of the stimulus package was linked to a plea for confidence, addressed to domestic as well as international audiences, to overcome the crisis of the world market, guard against protectionism, and to stabilize the domestic market by spending on durable consumer goods at home. The fact that the package was formulated responsibly and speedily (without having to pass many procedural hurdles) earned the Chinese leadership praise from other developing and developed countries alike at the G20 summits in Washington and London as well as during other prominent gatherings. Also, thanks to the enormous foreign exchange reserves China had amassed, the huge sum could be earmarked without raising the country's deficit ratio to irresponsibly high levels.

Another leitmotif was to make use of the crisis as an opportunity to address structural imbalances at home and enhance China's international standing. While most governments around the globe availed themselves of some version of these "crisis-as-opportunity" rhetoric, the Chinese leadership did not lose the opportunity to particularly emphasize the positive role of the party-state. In his report to the National People's Congress in March 2009, premier Wen Jiabao brought home the party's proactive role and the "advantages" of the party regime in dealing with the economic crisis.

> Our confidence and strength come from many sources: from the scientific judgment and correct grasp of the situation of the central leadership; from the policies and measures that have been formulated and implemented to respond to challenges and promote long-term development; [. . .]from our unique political and institutional advantages that enable us to mobilize resources to accomplish large undertakings, the stable, harmonious social environment we enjoy, and the enthusiasm and creativity of the whole nation from top to bottom to promote scientific development; and from the powerful spirit of the Chinese nation, which always works hard and persistently to make the country strong (Wen Jiabao 2009).

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

The Double-Edged Sword of Nationalism

Nationalism as a legitimation strategy also faces inherent dilemmas. The role of Chinese nationalism since the 1990s has been illustrated widely in the international media—a phenomenon put down to the growing disenchantment with the West in the wake of the Soviet collapse (Barmé 1995). Anti-western and anti-Japanese outbursts have been common. In the field of Chinese studies, scholars have discussed how much of this nationalist sentiment is state-

sponsored—rooted in the official cultivation of a well-behaved "patriotism" and national sovereignty instrumentalized by the Chinese party-state as an ersatz ideology—and how much is popular nationalism—resulting, among other factors, from the uncertainties produced by the pluralization and marketization of social life, ruptures in the process of socialization and the building of personal identities, mounting pressures in the fields of education and employment, and the ensuing sensibility toward nationalistic myths. Most authors agree that present-day nationalism is a complex mixture of both state and popular nationalism, where mechanisms of top-down and bottom-up mobilization are closely interrelated (Barmé 1995; Gries 2004; Link 2008; Unger 1996; Wang 2008; Zhao 2004).

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

Due to this complex interplay of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms of mobilization, the leveraging of nationalism as a source of regime legitimacy is an inherently problematic strategy. The Chinese leadership is well aware of this, at least one finds explicit warnings of the dangers of nationalism among party theorists and prominent scholars. Wan Jun (2003) from the Central Party School, for example, regards the resort to nationalism in China as a double-edged sword. While nationalist sentiments may hold a positive potential for social mobilization which could be instrumentalized to overcome a social crisis, they can easily grow out of control and cause a destructive mentality of aggression. Particularly in a multiethnic state, such as China, nationalist aspirations may not enhance social cohesion but rather subvert China's fragile national unity: "[a]s we urgently need to throw ourselves into the waves of world-wide economic globalization, we cannot do without the legitimation strategy of nationalism, but we should not use it in a rash manner, and always be very prudent and careful when applying it" (Wan 2003, 32). Chinese experts of international politics argue that the repeated outbursts of nationalist

sentiment in recent years have severely reduced the space of maneuver in China's diplomacy, a factor that has substantially increased the uncertainties of foreign policy making under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

The problematic nature of nationalist strategies of legitimation can be explained by looking at the ambivalent implications of the claim for national sovereignty, which has formed an integral element of political legitimation in all modern nation-states. According to David Beetham, the claim toward national sovereignty substantiates the constitutional rules and normatively validates the political power in a given nation-state by justifying the rightful source of authority. As such, national sovereignty bears a "characteristic dilemma:" on the one hand, it is a *sine qua non* condition of political power (the nation as the source of all sovereignty as framed during the French Revolution), but on the other hand, it makes the nation-state inherently vulnerable to external interference by other states, nonstate actors, and international agencies as well as to competing domestic interpretations of national sovereignty by marginalized ethnic groups within the boundaries of the respective nation-states (Beetham 1991, 121-35). The construction of the PRC as a multiethnic nation-state, with all its contested national identities and territorial disputes, is a most illuminating example of the disruptive character inherent in the claim for national sovereignty as a source of legitimation. Repeated outbursts of ethnic conflicts in areas inhabited by Tibetan, Uigur, and other minorities bear witness to this inherent dilemma of nationalism, as do the ongoing irritations in the international arena.

Indeed, as the waves of nationalist ire raging against the United States, Japan, and Western Europe mentioned above have shown, the Chinese government's vulnerability to external and internal interferences has been growing over the past decade (Jia 2005). All instances of surging popular nationalism were triggered by acts of foreign politicians (Japanese premiers visiting the Yasukuni shrine; Merkel and Sarkozy shaking hands with the Dalai Lama), by incidents involving foreign military actors (Belgrade bombing; U.S. reconnaisance plane), or unfavorable, "biased" coverage of China, particularly of ethnic conflicts, by international media outlets (the CNN and NTV coverage of the events in spring 2008). Overseas Chinese living in the West and having direct access to U.S. and European media played an unprecedented role in 2008 as patriotic "interpreters" of the alleged anti-Chinese publicity found in these countries. Their involvement presents a highly volatile element which could easily turn against decisions made by the same regime under different conditions.

The interplay between state nationalism and popular nationalism, between top-down and bottom-up mechanisms of mobilization, has been further complicated in the past few years by the increasingly prominent role played by the so-called New Left in China. The catch-all label is used to designate social scientists with rediscovered socialist or social-democratic visions, conservative Marxists, and a wide group of publicists with populist airs. While they usually

refuse to be lumped together under the category of the "New Left," what they share is the deep resentment against all forms of (neo)liberalism. Despite the heterogeneity of this group, it has become possible over the past few years to identify the New Left as a hotbed of increasingly self-assured, if not aggressive, forms of elite-sponsored nationalism. To avoid the negative connotations of nationalism (*minzuzhuyi*), protagonists themselves mostly use the term "patriotism" (*aiguozhuyi*). Pro-establishment social science scholars, such as Professor Hu Angang, founder of the Research Centre for China Studies at Qinghua University and advisor to the CCP leadership, while acknowledging the growing social contradictions during the reform period, have been propagating considerable national pride and prowess by extrapolating the miraculous development of China's "comprehensive national strength" and projecting the "steep rise of a great power" whose economic development will climb to ever new heights (e.g., Hu 2006; Men 2006).

Compared to this moderate economic nationalism, other social scientists have become quite outspoken in their criticism of what they regard as the hegemony of "Western" values, concepts, and institutions, such as democracy, human rights, the free market theories, the Washington consensus, and so on. In the wake of the 2008 events, various prominent scholars started to publicly question the universality of "universal values" claimed by the West. In September 2008, People's University Professor Zhou Xincheng stated in the *Guangming Daily*, the official newspaper addressing intellectual and cultural circles, that "what some people call 'universal values' are in fact Western values" (Zhou 2008).

While these pro-establishment figures clothe their criticism in rather vague and sweeping language and avoid to name-specific persons or countries, the authors of a recent national bestseller published in March 2009 with the title *Unhappy China: The Great Time, Grand Vision and Our* [*Domestic and External*] *Challenges* cross the limits of political correctness by naming names all over (probably one reason for the book becoming a bestseller). The book presents a collection of essays from five social scientists and journalists (among them Song Qiang, coauthor of the 1996 bestseller *China Can Say No*) who, in response to international criticisms of China in 2008, rage against foreign adversaries, such as U.S. hegemonism and its allies, particularly Sarkozy and Merkel. First and foremost, however, the authors lash out against "political elites, government economists, cultural elites, editors-in-chief and even some military chiefs" at home who are accused of buying the mistaken belief of neo-liberals that "the West would care for and reward China if it humbly accept the world's criticisms" and employing an overly soft approach toward the United States and Western Europe (Song Qiang 2009, 23). Among others, prominent Chinese intellectuals and writers with liberal outlooks or western educational background, as well as liberal Chinese media groups with internationally acknowledged track records of progressive investigative journalism, are derided as naïve lackeys of western and "universal values" (Song

et al. 2009, 29). The "grand vision" which the book outlines instead is that "with Chinese national strength growing at an unprecedented rate, China should stop debasing itself, recognize the fact that it has the power to lead the world and break away from Western influence." (cf. Li 2009, 22; Song *et al.* 2009, 41).

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

The End of the "End of Ideology"

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

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

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

Heeding the words of Deng Xiaoping ([1989] 1994, 297) who, after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, reflected that "our biggest mistake was in the area of education, in particular ideological and political education," his successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have invested much conceptual energy and large sums of money to modernize the party's ideology. Faced with the loss of power of Taiwan's ruling KMT (Kuomintang of China) in early 2000, the party

leadership under Jiang Zemin came forward with an explicit strategy to adapt its dominant ideology to a changing environment. Jiang Zemin's controversial concept of "Three Represents"[1] signaled that the CCP was about to redefine its formerly proletarian social base and cast its lot with the newly affluent segments of society (Lewis and Xue 2003).

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

When Hu Jintao took over from Jiang Zemin as party chief in late 2002, he faced the daunting challenge of putting an end to the ideological controversies surrounding the "Three Represents." Besides announcing a temporary ban on discussions of the issue in the media, in party organizations, and in academic circles in summer 2003 (Heilmann, Schulte-Kulkmann, and Shih 2004), he engineered a subtle reinterpretation of the formula's elitist connotations. Instead of emphasizing the "Three Represents" first term, namely, the "representation of the development of the advanced social productive forces" which had been stressed under Jiang Zemin, official discourse now emphasized the third term, the "representation of the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people" (cf. Lu 2000, 81-107, 128-39; Yue 2003, 14-7, 147-53). The essence of the "Three Represents" was now interpreted in official discourse as "establishing a party that is devoted to the public interest and governing for the people" (*Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*] 2003, 1).

Upholding this claim of innovativeness, Hu Jintao (and his advisors) came forward with a more theoretical concept of his own. The first was the "Scientific Outlook on Development," introduced in early 2004 as a grand strategy of "comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development" (*Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*] 2004, 1; cf. Holbig 2009, 28). With this concept, the new leadership distanced itself from the growth-only mentality of the first two decades of economic reforms and instead promised to balance economic development with social and ecological aspects.

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[1] The precise definition of the Three Represents (*san ge daibiao*) formula is "the importance of the communist party in modernizing the nation—representing the demands for the development of advanced social productive forces, the direction of advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people" (Lu 2000, 3; for a detailed analysis of the concept cf. Holbig 2009).

This was followed closely by another formula, the "Harmonious Socialist Society," which was innovative in explicitly acknowledging the existence of social tensions and claiming to tackle their root causes which were increasingly perceived as a risk to social stability and to the political legitimacy of CCP rule. Hu stated that a "Harmonious Socialist Society" was "essential for consolidating the party's social foundation to govern and achieving the party's historical governing mission" (*Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*] 2005c, 1).

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

Our analysis of more than 200 articles published in party school organs and scholarly journals between 2004 and 2008 revealed that the majority of authors dwelt on the important role of ideological adaptation and innovation which are seen as *the* prerequisite of relegitimating party rule ideology (Gilley and Holbig 2009). For Lu Ailin (2005, 2006, 18) of Henan's Zhongyuan Industrial College, who is one of the most prolific writers in contemporary China on party legitimacy, ideology is the "key factor for public identification with the political authority." Ideology is ascribed numerous positive functions, such as interpreting political order, cementing national identity, mobilizing support, and reducing economic transaction costs by enhancing social trust (Li 2005). A 2008 article in the journal *Qiushi* (*Seeking Truth*), the CCP's top party theory organ, argued that in China as elsewhere, ideology serves as cohesive force and "political soul" of parties worldwide, being the main instrument to mobilize support and active commitment to the party's cause. Compared to past periods of "ideological frenzy," the authors reflect, Chinese people today are no longer assessing their political leaders according to the party's program and principles, but rather according to its capacity and efficiency in solving real social problems. Socialist ideology should not be regarded as signaling only a remote ideal, but as a practical means to satisfy people's actual needs under the conditions of social transformation. The real challenge is posed to socialist ideology by the increasing social injustice which could lead to an identity crisis or even to a legitimacy crisis in China. If the party wants to maintain its

ideology-based legitimacy therefore, it has to take stringent measures to restore social justice and harmony (Nie and Hu 2008).

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

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

Culture and Its Competing Reinventions

According to U.S. scholar Sun Yan (1995, 18), ideology in China has important nationalist and culturalist underpinnings: "the Chinese concern for ideological and conceptual adaptation," she argues, "is related to the national search for identity and resurrection that has faced the nation since its confrontation with the West in the last century. Not incidentally, the reconceptualization of socialism is frequently linked with the question of 'cultural reconstruction'—the reconstruction of Chinese cultural values—in academic and political discussions."

Culturalism can be identified as an alternative strategy to legitimize party rule in China that has gained increasing currency over the past decade. While the reference here is not the claim for national sovereignty but the claim to represent the legacy of cultural tradition(s) of society and, with it, its cultural identity, nationalism and culturalism bear a strong structural similarity in that they are subject to a complex interplay between bottom-up and top-down mechanisms of mobilization. Parallel to the party-state's strategic ambiguity toward nationalist aspirations, we find quite ambivalent attitudes of the CCP leadership toward the revival of numerous traditional elements of "Chinese culture" that could be observed in the reform period. The renaissance of Confucianism is a most illustrative case in point. John Makeham (2008, 7), who analyzed its role in contemporary academic discourse, may be right that "the

widely held view that the promotion of Confucianism in contemporary China is orchestrated by the Party-state and its functionaries is untenable." Indeed, the renewed interest in Confucianism since the early 1980s seems to have originated inside various quarters of society without evident initiative (although with the silent toleration) by the central and local authorities. However, starting in 1986, we find the party-state reacting toward these bottom-up initiatives by attempting to regain at least discursive hegemony over what seems to have been perceived as an increasingly uncontrolled proliferation of "low" and "high culture" interpretations of Confucianism and to reframe them in ways compatible with the CCP's claims toward legitimate rule.

Within only a few years after the end of Cultural Revolution's iconoclastic campaigns, various Chinese folk traditions, among them Buddhism, Daoism (and its numerous Qigong and meditative applications, among them Falun Gong), and Confucianism enjoyed an impressive revival. Particularly in coastal areas with lineage links to overseas Chinese communities and/or with high concentrations of the newly affluent who had benefited first from the economic reforms, temples and other sites of worship were rebuilt, new adepts were recruited, fairs were revived, and religious rituals were reinstitutionalized. Through intensive fieldwork, Sébastin Billioud and others have unearthed numerous nonofficial manifestations of Confucianism in contemporary China. As they illustrate in detail, Confucian traditions came to play a growing role in fields, such as religion, spirituality, moral self-cultivation, philosophy (pseudo-) science, children's education, and so on. While most of these applications belong to a merely private realm, various local initiatives to organize classes and compile new textbooks based on the Sanzijing and other Confucian classics to be used in children's preschool and primary school education, border on competences that used to belong to official institutions in the decades since 1949 (Billioud 2007; Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2008).

The most challenging interpretations of Confucianism, however, can be found in academic discourse. As early as 1984, liberal scholars based at the prestigious Beijing University, such as Feng Youlan or Zhang Dainian, founded a nongovernmental academic organization called the Chinese Culture College. During frequent open lectures and seminars during the second half of the 1980s, eminent mainland scholars, such as Liang Shuming, and overseas Chinese scholars, such as Tu Wei-ming and Cheng Chung-ying, were invited to exchange their views about Chinese and western culture. While few of those liberal Confucianists propagated the introduction of western-style democracy, their aim in studying Confucianism has been to initiate a peaceful political transition in order to promote political transparency within China (Ai 2008; see also Dirlik 1995).

It was at this juncture that the party-state leadership felt the need to react and to recapture lost grounds in academic discourse. In March 1986, the State Education Commission organized a meeting during which Fang Keli, professor of philosophy at Tianjin's Nankai University, joined in the calls for a revival of

Confucianism in contemporary China, at least of those elements of "New Confucianism" that were compatible with the project of modernization. Starting that year, and well into the 1990s, Fang Keli was put in charge of various government-funded academic projects on New Confucianism which produced dozens of books and several hundred academic papers (Ai 2008). In this official interpretation of Confucianism, the aim is to enrich Marxism by drawing on the essence of traditional doctrines. In Fang's words (1991, 62), Confucianism should be studied and modified "under the stances, principles, and methodologies of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought." Traditional elements of Confucianism most appealing to this tailor-made socialist Confucianism are the love of social order and stability, acceptance of hierarchy, devotion to the family and the state, and so on. These values—which apparently are most qualified to support the legitimation of authoritarian rule— resonate with traditional cultural values that are still rooted very deeply in the political cultures and societies of mainland China as well as on Taiwan (Shi 2001).

The battle of discursive hegemony had not been won, however. Starting in 1989, and with increasing vigor over the 1990s and 2000s, a third interpretation of Confucianism was established, spearheaded by prominent scholars, such as Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang. These "Confucians" (*rujia*), claiming to represent the true essence of traditional Confucianism, seek to rediscover the Confucian values of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, sincerity, harmony, loyalty, and filial piety, as a programmatic alternative to Marxist ideology, which they regard not only as alien to China, but as standing in the way of realizing the great nation's historical mission. Jiang Qing (1991, 85) demanded explicitly to develop a "political Confucianism" to replace Marxism as orthodox ideology representing Chinese culture, and more recently, even suggested to "Confucianize the CCP" and to "peacefully transform the CCP through Confucianism" (cf. Ai 2008; Jiang 2007, 26). According to Kang Xiaoguang (2005, 2007), Chinese people had the right to be ruled properly by a ruling class elected by "Confucians with virtue" in a "Confucian authoritarian regime" which he advocated to establish as an alternative to the present Communist party regime. As this vocabulary reveals, the legitimacy of authoritarian rule by the CCP came under direct assault from another authoritarian utopia formulated by restorative Confucians.

Faced with the ongoing challenge of competing interpretations of Confucianism, it seems the new party leadership under Hu Jintao decided to draw back from this academic battle and to "neutralize" this contested element of tradition by reconfiguring it within the larger context of "traditional Chinese culture." While official slogans, such as the goal to create a "well-off society" or "social harmony," bear some vague connotations with Confucian notions, these notions are reduced to sterile clichés representing an amorphous imaginaire of historical achievements and future greatness that is referred to as Chinese culture. The Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games, with its impressive

kaleidoscope of China's "four great inventions" of ancient times, highlights from the fine arts and skills of imperial times, demonstrations of technological prowess plus of course the symbols of national sovereignty, presented an ideal-type manifestation of this reconstructed ensemble of Chinese cultural identity (CCTV.com 2008). While the Communist revolution and the subsequent eras of party rule were not covered in the show, the honor of hosting the sports mega-event and sponsoring this firework of symbols clearly bolstered the party-state's claim to represent this cultural identity of the Chinese nation.

The growing presence over recent years of symbols, images, and artifacts reminiscent of traditional Chinese culture in public and private life—architecture, fashion wear, lifestyle accessories, offers to spend one's leisure time, and in the advertisement industry (Frisch 2009)—bear testimony to the wide resonance of culturalism in present-day China, which the party leadership has learned to tap as another source of regime legitimacy. The empirical evidence is also compelling (Shi 2008).

Walking the Tightrope of Democracy and Governance

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

Four of the factors—bureaucratic efficiency, the empowerment of people's congresses, the rule of law, and inner-party democracy—fall within the normal understanding of institutionalization. These reflect the normal concepts of "rational-legal" legitimation as understood by Weber or Huntington. Institutionalization here means the development of more autonomous, specialized, capacity-rich, and noncorrupt institutions for the formulation and implementation of public policy.

But three other factors included in the institutionalist cluster—the incorporation of new social groups, consultative democracy, and electoral democracy—in fact concern popular input. The concept of "democracy" has been appropriated by the party as a strategy of institutionalization—and the propaganda strategy of using the term "western-style democracy" to distinguish it from normal democracy is aimed at paving the way for this strategy to succeed (Xia 2008a). In addition to the well-known and widely established semi-competitive elections at the village level, Zhu Lingjun (2006, Chapter 8) describes a variety of direct election experiments of people's congresses, leadership committees, and leaders of both government and party at the township and county (or district and city) levels as well that are expected to uphold legitimacy. In addition to this, the party is experimenting with consultative and deliberative forums where civic leaders, social groups, and commoners are invited to help formulate public policies.

All this is believed by the party to be a key source of legitimacy because it is a way to ensure that the CCP responds to growing social complexity and value shifts. Of course, democracy is not alien to the CCP's traditional claim for legitimacy; on the contrary, the claim for popular sovereignty has always been one of the two pillars of the CCP's justification of its authority, the other pillar being the scientific doctrine of Leninism.

According to Maria Markus (1982, 84), it is precisely this combination of bottom-up ("democratic") and top-down (Leninist) legitimacy doctrines which accomplishes "legitimation of a hierarchically downwards-oriented system of power and command in the name of a 'real' popular sovereignty." Thus, debating democracy in China always means walking the tightrope between socialist and other, competing (liberal, social-democrat, Confucian, deliberative, and so on) claims toward the correct interpretation of the principle popular sovereignty (Holbig 2009). The contested nature of direct township elections in China—where bottom-up democratic urges compete with top-down Leninist and legalistic ones—nicely reflects the tensions inherent in the CCP's embrace of the word "democracy."

Objectively, institutionalization has been increasingly seen by scholars as a source of legitimacy for the CCP (Nathan 2003; Yang 2004). Indeed, China tends to be relatively well governed for a country of its income level. In linking democracy to the substantive outcome of popularly perceived good governance, rather than to procedural guarantees, Beijing has reclaimed democracy for its own. As Shi Tianjian (2008, 236) notes, "the regime has been able to define democracy in its own terms, drawing on ideas of good government with deep roots in the nation's historical culture and more recent roots in its ideology of socialism."

Problems arise, then, when the state suffers a governance-based performance failure. While its response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was generally applauded in China, the death of up to 10,000 school children in the disaster as a result of the collapse of schools and school dormitories has created a genuine social movement, and pocket of legitimacy crisis. Corruption is another good example. A scathing report on corruption in China issued by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2005 warned that the party's legitimacy was threatened, in particular by widespread absconding with funds whose levels amounted to several percentage points of gross domestic product per year (OECD 2005). The report has subsequently disappeared from the OECD's list of publications. In a Hunan Organization Department survey of 200 cadres in 2001, corruption was cited as second only to underdevelopment as a source of legitimation problems (Zhu 2006, 312).

This is a reminder that subjective perceptions of corruption (fueled by both personal experiences as well as information about objective levels from sources, such as the OECD) matter most of all. Corruption has its own indirect corrosive influences on legitimacy by undermining capacity and effectiveness. But its direct impact on legitimacy only occurs if it becomes known and disliked.

Beetham (1991) argues that corruption causes legitimacy deficits when it is publicly perceived as clearly favoring particular social groups and thus going against the "common interest."

As for elections, there is considerable debate concerning the legitimating effects of electoral participation in China. China's scholars and party school researchers express a lot of interest in the potential of "orderly" political participation as an untapped source of legitimacy (Xia 2008b). Indeed, as mentioned, voluntary political participation should be seen as part of the *definition* of consent-legitimacy itself. Yet, turnout rates for village and urban elections (typically in the 50-70 percent range) are below the 90 percent plus rates typically seen as necessary for evidence of mass support in authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the attitudinal side benefits that elections might be expected to generate are unclear. One official survey found that 59 percent of urban residents believed that the direct election of residential committees (the same level as villages) was "a mere formality or a sham" (Wang 2002, 232).

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

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

Finally, it is worth mentioning explicit "liberal" strategies of legitimation. These are rare. Notions of human rights, civil society, the separation of party and government functions, and multiparty democracy remain marginal or even inimical to the CCP's overall plans. The party wrote human rights into the state constitution in 2004 and in 2009 issued a National Human Rights Action Plan. But the protection of human rights remains largely rhetorical. Perhaps more importantly, the party has never quite succeeded in wholly eliminating the liberal view from Chinese politics—a view born in the reform era in the 1979

Democracy Wall and 1989 Tiananmen movements, and recently relaunched as a movement of 300-plus intellectuals demanding democratic constitutional change, calling themselves the *Charter 08* movement (in imitation of Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 group), with its declaration that "political legitimacy must come from the people."

Mass values may be a long way from liberal norms, but the critical views of social activists and liberal intellectuals offer a constant challenge to the party's illiberal strategy. Beijing-based rights lawyer Teng Biao (2009, 120), a signatory of *Charter 08*, argues that "more and more people are beginning to emerge from their fear, beginning to speak the truth, and beginning to join the ranks of the fight for freedom." Yet the salience of these emergent liberals remains low. As the sympathetic sister of one of the leaders of the China Democracy Party noted after it was easily crushed in 1998-99: "[t]hey failed to take the measure of the national mood" (Zha 2007, 54).

Conclusion

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

Scholars thus approach the question of legitimacy in contemporary China with much trepidation. They not only want to avoid a teleology of inevitable democratization, but also seek to avoid the equal and opposite teleology of an inevitable authoritarian durability. While legitimation challenges and failures exist, the CCP has so far overcome them. The issue for analysts is to develop predictive models that can identify *ex ante* when this is no longer true. In pursuing that goal, we are taken into the dynamics of CCP survival and are

forced constantly to ask questions about social change and state adaptation. Using the lens of legitimacy allows us to focus on all the important issues of contemporary Chinese politics.

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