

# Democratising One-Party Rule? Political Reform, Nationalism and Legitimacy in the People's Republic of China



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67

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# Contents

Introduction	1
Demanding democracy and limits on freedoms	2
Everything is relative: the extension of rights and freedoms	4
Bases of legitimacy for authoritarian rule: a social contract with Chinese characteristics?	7
Legitimacy and economic growth	7
The CCP and the bourgeoisie/middle class	8
Legitimacy and stability	11
Nationalism and democracy in the People's Republic of China	13
Official nationalism and democracy	13
Towards Chinese exceptionalism?	16
Popular nationalism and democracy	17
Popular nationalism, the national project and criticising the state	18
Making authoritarianism work	21
Demanding democratisation: transparency and legalism	21
Supplying democratisation	22
Conclusions: towards democratisation with Chinese characteristics	25
Democratisation with Chinese characteristics: tensions and trends	26
Democratisation with Chinese characteristics: the implications for Europe	28



# Introduction

This working paper will consider the evidence of democratising trends in China by focusing on the supply of and demand for democratisation, and evaluate what this means for European democracy promotion initiatives. We encounter a problem in this very first sentence of the paper, in that assessing the real demand for liberal democracy in China is all but impossible. It is true that complaining about policy is increasingly not only tolerated, but at times actually encouraged. Individuals are also encouraged to stand against Party members for elections to village, township, county and district level assemblies – and some have even won. But straying into the realm of complaining about the Party *per se* is more dangerous. While challenging individual Party members is one thing, challenging the Party's overall political leadership is something else entirely and wholly illegitimate. As such, it is probably fair to assume that the penalties for openly demanding democracy act as a strong incentive to self-censorship.

Conversely, while the number of officially recorded demonstrations has risen in recent years, we cannot automatically assume that these represent demands for democracy; or at least, not for Western liberal democracy. Available evidence suggests that they are typically based on single issue concerns where participants feel that they have been treated unfairly and/or illegally. The demands – at the moment at least – are more for the party-state to act fairly and in keeping with its own regulations and laws than they are for more fundamental political reform.

Indeed, a key argument pursued in what follows is that demands for liberal democracy have not yet been forthcoming for two key reasons. Firstly, the relationship between key groups and the authoritarian political system is carefully managed, and secondly, patriotism/nationalism is important as a source not only of legitimation for authoritarian rule, but also of popular aspiration. However, as the leadership

reconsiders the efficacy of the bases of its relationship with the people, there has been considerable debate within the Party about the need not only for political reform, but also for an increasing supply of democratisation – though we need to take care in the use of words here.

In these Chinese discourses, the call for “democracy” and “democratisation” do not refer to the move towards competitive multi-party democracy through which one-party rule is challenged. On the contrary, because China's leaders do not take the Party's continued grip on power for granted, democratisation is seen as a means of responding to perceived societal disaffection and strengthening one-party rule. These leaders are well aware that the growth of inequality, corruption and environmental degradation could undermine their position. They are also aware that many Chinese are frustrated with the actions of individual local leaders, and of a fairly widespread popular assumption that party-state officials serve their own self interest first, rather than acting as Mao had exhorted them, to “serve the people”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, democratisation is seen as a means of creating a more transparent, open and consultative political system increasingly based on and constrained by legal structures in order to re-establish the relationship between the people and the Party and to re-legitimise one-party rule.

Of course, the extent to which the search for an inclusive, consultative, yet still authoritarian political system is sustainable in the long term is open to question. Equally questionable is the extent to which external actors and interests can do anything to promote alternative forms of (liberal) democratic political change in China. Given the strength of nationalist feeling in China and resistance to the perceived imposition of external “Western” norms, anything that comes from the outside runs the risk of

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<sup>1</sup> “Serve the people” - 为人民服务 *wei renmin fuwu* – was the title of a speech made by Mao in September 1944 that mandated funeral memorials for anybody who died in conflict or in CCP occupied territory. After 1949, it became the supposed basis of Party rule and an order to all cadres – a slogan that became ubiquitous across the country.

being denounced as either based on a lack of understanding and knowledge of China's unique position or as a new form of Western imperialism (or both). The unpalatable position for those who advocate promoting democratic change in China is that this advocacy might simply result in the rejection of those very same democratic principles. Indeed, rather than challenging the basis of authoritarian rule, promoting democracy might ironically act to reinforce at least one of the bases of single-party rule in China.

## Demanding democracy and limits on freedoms

The extent to which freedoms (of various types) are constrained in China has been widely discussed for many years. Despite constitutional guarantees, foreign governments, NGOs and academics have pointed to the continued restrictions on religious freedom, the treatment of ethnic minorities, restrictions on reproductive rights as well as limits on freedom of association, expression and other political rights. These issues have been widely discussed and there is no reason to repeat them here.<sup>2</sup> However, given the focus of this specific paper, it is perhaps worth briefly examining the specific restraints on the articulation of demands for democracy.

The PRC is a self-declared "People's Democratic Dictatorship" where "state power is in the hands of the people and serves the interests of the people"<sup>3</sup> and Article 35 of the PRC constitution states that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration". But

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the "fullest" overview of these issues is found in the annual US Department of State "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" for China. The 2007 report is available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100518.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> State Council, *White Paper: Building of Political Democracy in China*, Beijing, Information Office of the State Council.

this does not mean that the people are free to do what they want. Under the Four Cardinal Principles ( 四項基本原則 jiben yuanze) that "guide" Communist Party rule, political participation is limited by (1) the need to follow the socialist road and uphold (2) the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and (4) the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). So effectively anything that suggests that the leadership of the CCP should be challenged falls beyond the limits of the permissible and legitimate.

Until fairly recently, the Chinese legal system had specific codes and articles relating to what were termed counter-revolutionary crimes:

Article 90 of *The Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China* mandates that "all acts endangering the People's Republic of China committed with the goal of overthrowing the political power of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist system are crimes of counter-revolution." To be more specific, Articles 91-104 enumerate twelve types of counter-revolutionary crimes ranging from treason, espionage, hijacking, sabotage, terrorism and coup d'état to counter-revolutionary association and propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

The specific references to counter-revolutionary crimes were removed from the legal code in March 1997. But despite the name change, little has changed. The revised version states that:

"The tasks of the PRC Criminal Law are to use punishment struggle against all criminal acts to defend national security, the political power of the people's democratic dictatorship, and the socialist system..."

while Article 13 includes in its definition of crimes those:

<sup>4</sup> Though Xin Ren's overarching argument is that the silencing of opposition through the legal system has a long tradition in China that far predates the creation of the PRC. Xin Ren, *Tradition of the Law and Law of the Tradition: Law, State, and Social Control in China*, Westport CT., Greenwood, 1997, p.89.

“acts that endanger the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the state; split the state; subvert the political power of the people’s democratic dictatorship and overthrow the socialist system; undermine social and economic order...”

This effectively means that promoting democracy is subject to prosecution under law.<sup>5</sup>

Those punished for political “crimes” under the Criminal Law are typically charged with Crimes of Endangering National Security, Endangering Public Security, or Disrupting Public Order. Along with other “ordinary” criminals,<sup>6</sup> those convicted can receive as part (or exceptionally, all) of their punishment the “deprivation of political rights”. This not only prevents the convicted from holding positions in state or social organisations, but also, under Article 54, removes:

- (1) the right to elect and the right to be elected;
- (2) the right to freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession, and of demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

In combination, this means that the only condition imposed upon the freedoms outlined in Article 35 of the state constitution is that they must not be used to challenge the democratic dictatorship and the “socialist system”, which means the CCP’s monopoly of political power. Moreover, if those freedoms are exercised to challenge the system, then the right to make such challenges through use of the Criminal Law is sacrificed.

Moreover, both the old and new criminal codes do not clearly establish where the boundary lies between the legitimate and illegitimate. Promoting democracy and the overthrow of Party rule is clearly beyond the pale. Criticising specific policies is legitimate, but not if they are deemed to be subverting power and/or undermining

social stability. Liu Binyan, for example, who managed to be purged three times in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s, always claimed that he was a loyal critic of the system – the nation’s conscience – who simply wanted CCP rule to be better, fairer and for the People. In fact, he came to think of the CCP leadership as unreformable and the source of many problems by the late 1980s, but for much of his life and career he was committed to improving the system and not replacing it.<sup>8</sup> His treatment by two different generations of Chinese leaders is an example of how the CCP leadership has at times been unprepared or unable (or both) to accept even loyal criticism; and the tendency to treat criticism as dissent has at times become a self-fulfilling prophesy, leading to critics becoming dissidents.

Indeed, there have been many occasions in PRC history when what has been legitimate at one time has subsequently been deemed illegitimate because policy and definitions have changed. The most famous instance was the charge of “rightism” against those who had been encouraged to speak up and criticise during the 100 Flowers campaign of 1956. In the 1980s, policy towards intellectuals was often revised as a result of complaints that new freedoms had been taken too far. Periods of expansion of freedoms were followed by contractions as more conservative groups pointed to the dangers of spiritual pollution and bourgeois liberalisation. In the resulting backlash, what had been legitimate was sometimes *ex post facto* defined as illegitimate and the appropriate action taken.<sup>9</sup> Despite the more open and predictable political situation today, raising grievances still carries at least some risk of being deemed illegitimate dissent, or even an illegal action punishable by law.

Whilst those who advocate democracy are typically silenced by the legal system, they may alternatively, or additionally, be allowed to go into exile. Allowing

<sup>5</sup> *Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China* available at <http://www.com-law.net/findlaw/crime/criminallaw1.html>

<sup>6</sup> Chen notes that Chinese scholars use the notion of “ordinary crimes” to distinguish them from political crimes. Chen Jianfu, *Chinese Law: Towards an Understanding of Chinese Law, Its Nature and Development*, Amsterdam, Kluwer, 1999, p.187.

<sup>7</sup> *Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China*

<sup>8</sup> For more on his life and views, see Liu Binyan, *A Higher Kind of Loyalty*, New York, Pantheon, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Chan, Sylvia., “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Towards a ‘Free’ Literature”, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 19/20, 1988, pp.81-126.

dissidents to leave the country not only lets them preach to the already converted rather than causing potential instability at home, but also reduces pressure from foreign governments who often focus their public actions on high profile individual cases (rather than the rights regime in general).<sup>10</sup> Amongst the many examples of such exiled or self-exiled “dissidents”, perhaps the most famous are the aforementioned Liu Binyan, Fang Lizhi (an astrophysicist whose talks on democracy sparked pro-democracy protests, and who sought asylum in the US embassy in 1989) and Yan Jiaqi, an influential political scientist in the Political Structure Reform Research Group at CASS who advised Zhao Ziyang on political reform and supported the students in 1989.<sup>11</sup> All three were associated with the 1989 democracy movement in one way or another, and there is a long list of exiled dissidents who trace their exile back to 1989. Of course, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 remains a potent example of the lengths that the leadership were (and perhaps still are) prepared to go to restore order and quash protests. As will be discussed later, the extent to which this really was a movement for democracy – for Western competitive multi-party democracy – is open to question. Or perhaps more correctly, the extent to which it started out as a dissident movement is open to question, as what happened on June 4<sup>th</sup> clearly has turned many of the survivors into opponents of the CCP and the Chinese state. While there is a real desire among some parts of the leadership, not just the people, to apologise and to reverse the verdicts on the protestors as counter-revolutionaries, there are too many senior officials who were too close to what happened in

<sup>10</sup> We might note here that China’s first truly national political party - the revolutionary alliance (Tongmeng Hui 同盟会) was formed in exile overseas in Japan 1905. It was in Japan and elsewhere that many young Chinese students also first came into contact with conceptions of liberalism, social Darwinism, socialism and anarchism that provided strong alternatives to the Confucian status quo. Those who returned to China, particularly those in the military, were instrumental in propagating the 1911 revolution that led to the overthrow of the Empire. Sun Yatsen also spent much of the most successful part of his revolutionary career generating support and finances from overseas Chinese in the United States and East Asia. This is not to suggest that dissident movements overseas are building a potent anti-CCP movement, but just to note that there can be a link between overseas groupings and domestic change back home.

<sup>11</sup> For more detail see the translation of Yan’s works on democratisation in Bachman, David., and Yang, Dali., *Yan Jiaqi and China’s Struggle for Democracy*, Armonk NY, Sharpe, 1991.

Tiananmen for a resolution just yet. While June 4<sup>th</sup> remains something of a shadow over the pretensions of any Chinese leader to show the Party in a new light as a listening, engaged and benign authoritarian leadership, it also acts as a stark reminder to those who might want to become active of what might happen if they do.

Moreover, June 4<sup>th</sup> is not the only example. Wei Jingsheng, who called for democracy to be the fifth modernisation during the democracy wall movement in 1978-9 was jailed, briefly released in 1993, re-arrested and jailed, and only finally freed and exiled in 1997. More recently, attempts to create a China Democracy Party in 1998 were squashed at birth and its members arrested (see: Wright 2002).<sup>12</sup> In the run-up to the Olympics, the authorities seemed to become increasingly nervous about the possibility of protests spoiling the carefully choreographed image of modern China, and once again seemed to find it difficult to distinguish between anti-systemic dissent on the one hand, and either loyal criticism and/or policy specific complaints on the other. Anything that was critical of the Olympics was apparently considered un-patriotic and pre-emptive detentions of those who might become “troublesome” during the games appeared to be taking place.<sup>13</sup> So it seems that one straightforward explanation for why democratisation has not flourished in China is because the state doesn’t want it to, and does what it can to punish its proponents.

## Everything is relative: the extension of rights and freedoms

While the legal system can be and is used to protect the current system from threats, and perhaps at times from loyal criticism mis-perceived as threats, the nature of Chinese authoritarianism has vastly changed from not

<sup>12</sup> See Wright, Teresa., “The China Democracy Party and the Politics of Protest in the 1980s–1990s”, *The China Quarterly*, No.172, 2002, pp.906-926.

<sup>13</sup> Watts, Jonathan, “Chinese dissident jailed for five years after human rights petition”, *The Guardian* 25<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

just the Mao era, but also the first decade of reform. While the current Chinese system might be judged to be relatively repressive when compared to politically liberal societies, it looks remarkably liberal – much more free – when compared to even a relatively recent past. Indeed, in assessing the progress of political reform in China, it is essential to retain a sensible expectation of what can be expected.

To bring a personal note to the analysis, when I first went to China as an undergraduate in 1984, the Chinese were not free to work where they wanted, live where they wanted or even buy much of what they wanted. The nomenklatura system was in the process of being reformed, but even after the 1984 changes, access to decent jobs remained contingent on having the right political credentials. Other jobs were allocated (the 安排 *anpai* system) by administrative fiat, with accommodation then allocated by the work unit (or *danwei* 单位). Work units distributed food tokens to be used in their canteens (typically different canteens for different levels with very different qualities of food), and had to provide approval for those whose turn had come to buy high demand goods (such as bicycles) or who wanted to travel. Visiting somebody at a different work unit usually entailed being signed in and out, and even who you married was not an entirely free choice. Marriage before the approved age required work unit approval, and even then, there was no guarantee that the unit(s) would provide living accommodation for married couples. In the late 1980s, tens of thousands of married couples lived in different cities because they could not get joint accommodation or one of the partners couldn't change their hukou 户口 – the system whereby individuals could only live in the place where they were officially registered. Eating at restaurants outside the workplace was possible, but entailed the use of ration cards and the ability to get served in the two to three hours that most places were open. Entertainment options were strictly limited and the state wanted to control what people read, watched and listened to. And as we shall see, dissatisfaction with this system was at least part of the reason why students took to political activism in 1989.

Authoritarian one-party rule today is very much changed. Minxin Pei notes that norms have emerged in China that, whilst falling far short of democratisation, nevertheless represent a significant difference from previous eras. For example, while the torture of dissidents does occur, the torture of their family members “has become almost taboo”, allowing them to campaign on behalf of their family members' rights relatively free from the fear of suffering the same fate.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more important for this paper, the party-state is becoming better at distinguishing between what it considers to be “illegitimate” anti-system dissidence and the “legitimate” airing of grievances over government failures. The key here is the introduction of the “administrative litigation law” which came into operation in October 1990. O'Brien and Li (1996) have shown that where there is a good knowledge of what is legal and what is not, peasants have a remarkably good record in using the legal system to protect their rights.<sup>15</sup> Of course, the essential factor is peasants knowing what rights they have and what rights they don't as a precondition for action; and the system is far from free, fair and open. As they pointed out in a later paper, local government officials have found myriad ways to slow procedures and even to simply stop litigation. And given the nature of the system, preventing the spread of knowledge of laws is a powerful tool. But it is nevertheless very different from the *status quo ante* and, in some places, not only constitutes a sign of tolerance, but also indicates that the legal system is being promoted as a check and balance on the authority of the state.<sup>16</sup>

The election system isn't perfect, but more people have a chance to influence the way their lives are run than ever before. For example, villagers in China are experimenting in choosing one of their own as a form

<sup>14</sup> Minxin Pei, “Rights and Resistance; The Changing Contexts of the Dissident Movement” in Elizabeth Perry and Marc Selden (eds.) *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp.23-46.

<sup>15</sup> Lianjiang Li and O'Brien, Kevin., “Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China” *Modern China*, No.22, 1996, pp.28-61.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, Kevin., and Lianjiang Li, “Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China”, *The China Journal*, No.51, 2004, pp.76-96.

of “political manager” to coordinate and oversee political issues while competitive elections are allowing for non-party members to seek and win representative office. Peerenboom has also pointed to the strengthening of legal forms and the much more predictable and transparent workings of People’s Congresses (at various levels) and government agencies.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, popular pressure can and does change things, perhaps most famously in Fanglin in 2001. After an explosion at a local school killed over 40 children, Premier Zhu Rongji first claimed the explosion was the result of a suicide bomber.

“It certainly is not the case that this primary school was trying to earn some money by trying to rent out space to store materials for fireworks. A man had grievances and he had a mental illness. He transported these fireworks and materials to the ground floor. He lit them and blew himself up.”

The truth, that the schoolchildren were indeed making fireworks, only emerged as a result of a concerted campaign by local families and the local press in the face of considerable official opposition. The media is also taking a high profile role in exposing official corruption and providing at least some form of check on the exercise of power.

In some ways an arguably more important change is the creation of a legitimate private space. Chinese homo economus are free to choose and free to buy from an increasingly wide range of outlets without the state being particularly interested; the main constraint is now cost. Jobs are no longer allocated but gained through merit – though personal connections and outright corruption play an important role in many cases, as we will discuss in more detail later. China even has two state ministers who are not Party members (though good political credentials of course remain important). Workplace assigned accommodation is not

so much no longer compulsory as almost impossible to find – even state owned enterprises have privatised much of their stock and tried to reduce the burden of housing their employees where possible. People can watch a range of TV programmes and films that have no political content at all, and choose from an almost overwhelming array of “popular culture” magazines. Eating and drinking where you want is up to you, and people even have more choice to marry who they want – even to have sex before marriage or live together without getting married (though it still offends the moral sensibilities of many).

There are still, of course, constraints. The state still controls the flow of information and retains controls over suspect political literature and culture. It also maintains close surveillance of the internet to check for politically suspect activity. Compared to the West, this is still a restrictive political system. We should also be very much aware that these freedoms are not available to all. The options open to younger urban middle groups – the new middle classes? – are simply not affordable for many millions of less well off urban dwellers whose priorities and goals are more basic. Moreover, the options are simply not there for many millions more in the countryside. We should also note that periods of opening often give way to periods of stricter control and less tolerance (which, as already suggested, was the case in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics).

While it may not appear that dramatic when compared to the West, the creation of a private sphere in China is hugely significant. Where the state once interfered in all parts of everybody’s lives, it has now withdrawn and allowed a private space that people can occupy as individuals – and within which they can do much as they like. There is one caveat – and a very important one. This freedom and private sphere exists only if people accept the political status quo and do not engage in overt political activity that the state deems to be illegitimate. Whereas the Maoist state wanted every Chinese citizen to participate and be politically active, the contemporary state encourages apoliticism, and rewards citizens with a private sphere if they keep to their side of the bargain.

<sup>17</sup> Peerenboom, Randall., *China Modernizes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.20.

But it is not just about taking a step back from interfering in all aspects of the daily lives of individuals. For much of the post-Mao period, the unwritten social contract between the party-state and the people has been built on three other pillars. If the people don't compete with the Party in the political sphere, the Party will provide the people first with material advancement and second with stability. It will also defend China's national interests in a hostile and dangerous international environment. These three pillars have changed somewhat in recent years under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao with a renewed emphasis on equity, social welfare and "democratisation" (it is still too soon to tell whether this represents a new pillar of legitimacy, or rather changes to the existing three). So this paper will now proceed by considering these bases of legitimacy, and what they mean for democratisation in China.

## Bases of legitimacy for authoritarian rule: a social contract with Chinese characteristics?<sup>18</sup>

### Legitimacy and economic growth

The first of these bases of legitimacy, perhaps most obvious of all, is legitimacy through economic performance. In abandoning the Maoist model and embracing economic reform, the Party originally

<sup>18</sup> Deng Xiaoping referred to the adoption of liberalising economic reforms in China as creating "socialism with Chinese characteristics" – 有中国特色的社会主义 You Zhongguo Tesede Shehuizhuyi, sometimes 具有 Juyou rather than just 有 you. The importance of adapting political forms to meet the specific and unique context of reform in China has subsequently resulted in a wide range of political forms gaining the suffix "with Chinese characteristics" and is used here to reflect the Chinese emphasis on the unique nature of what is happening in China.

argued that the establishment of a socialist society would have to wait until the "primary contradiction" had been dealt with. Whereas Mao identified the primary contradiction as class conflict, dealing with the relatively backward nature of the Chinese economy was now seen as the Party's primary task.

Notably, while the world might look at China and see an inevitable economic superpower, the Chinese leadership is still emphasising how far it has to go before this basic task of economic reconstruction has been attained. In establishing the idea that China was in "The Primary Stage of Socialism" in 1987 – effectively an *ex post facto* justification for allowing the growth of quasi private ownership – Zhao pointed to the fact that China was still massively behind advanced industrialised economies, and would have to "go through an extremely long primary stage". Over two decades later, in a signed *People's Daily* article in February 2007, Premier Wen Jiabao re-affirmed the importance of growth promotion as the Party's primary task by associating himself with the economic priorities of his predecessors in remarkably similar language:

"China is at the primary stage of socialism, and will remain so for a long time to come. The primary stage means a stage of underdevelopment, which manifests itself, first and foremost, in the low level of the productive forces. Therefore, we must unswervingly take economic development as the central task and go all out to boost the productive forces."<sup>19</sup>

To be sure, the growth of the new rich in China has been phenomenal – perhaps as many as 80 million people in 2007. But while 80 million is a lot of people, it is a relatively small percentage of the overall population – just over six percent<sup>20</sup> – and the aspirations of the

<sup>19</sup> Wen Jiabao, "关于社会主义初级阶段的历史任务和我国对外政策的几个问题 Guanyu Shehuizhuyi Chuji Jieduan de Lishi Renwu he Woguo Duiwai Zhence de Jige Wenti" ("On the Historical Mission of the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues of Our Foreign Policy"), *People's Daily*, 26 February 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, David., and Zang, Xiaowei., "The New Rich in China: Dimensions of Social Change" in David Goodman (ed.) *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives*, London, Routledge, 2008, p.1.

majority of Chinese are still to attain a decent standard of living; indeed, notwithstanding almost incredible growth rates (and also notwithstanding official Chinese statistics), at least as many people live on less than US\$1 a day in China as are “rich”.<sup>21</sup> So although there is an emerging middle class - which we will return to shortly - a socioeconomic agenda, rather than a post-materialist democratising alternative, remains the primary concern for the majority of the Chinese.

The primacy of this socioeconomic agenda is reinforced by the rhetoric of party policy. In much the same way as Deng Xiaoping urged the Chinese to aspire to become 10,000 Yuan households at the start of the reform process, becoming part of the “middle class” (sometimes translated in English language publications as “middle income class”) has become a state-sponsored aspiration today. For example, Jiang Zemin emphasised the Party’s goal of creating a “*xiaokang* 小康” society “less affluent than ‘well-off’ but better off than freedom from want”. Post Jiang, the Party has explicitly used the term “middle class” (*zhongchan jieji* 中产阶级) rather than *xiaokang* in establishing its goals for societal change. In essence, whether it be the creation of a *xiaokang* or middle class society, the Party promises to provide a structure in which all citizens can become relatively well-off if the people do not challenge the Party for political power.

## The CCP and the bourgeoisie/ middle class<sup>22</sup>

The Party feels that it needs a large middle class to overcome the political problems that could emerge from the maintenance of a wide divide between different societal groups. A social structure with a small but very wealthy elite, a slightly bigger but still relatively small middle-income class, and a massive

base of poor and relatively poor is not considered to be politically stable. Of course, some democratisation theorists see the growth of a middle class as an essential pre-requisite, if not the origins of the demand for democratisation. Yet as we have seen, far from fearing the rise of the *xiaokang* society, the Party welcomes it and portrays itself as the only force that can bring about this class transformation. So is the Party creating something that might ultimately result in its own demise?

For the time being at least, there does not appear to be any real competition from the emerging new middle or bourgeois classes for political power; and at the risk of oversimplification, we can identify five main reasons. Firstly, we need to consider the size of these new groups/classes.<sup>23</sup> By and large, four different criteria have been used to calculate the size of the Chinese middle class – (1) occupation, (2) income, (3) spending power and lifestyle, and (4) self classification. Given the different criteria used, it is not surprising that analyses of the size of the Chinese middle class differ greatly. The highest figure is based on a survey of nearly 6,000 urban residents by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which found that just under half now consider themselves to be in the middle class.<sup>24</sup> A much smaller figure emerges from using income and spending power criteria. Here, a good working definition of the middle class is “a group of people with stable incomes, capable of purchasing private houses and cars, and who can afford the costs of private education for children and vacation”.<sup>25</sup>

This definition sees the middle class in China rising from 15 percent in 1999 to around 19 percent in 2003.<sup>26</sup> However, Li Chunling<sup>27</sup> is highly sceptical of

<sup>23</sup> Official Chinese reports tend to refer to stratification and use the term *jieceng* 阶层 or social strata, rather than class (*jieji* 阶级).

<sup>24</sup> Lu Xueyi, (ed.) *当代中国社会流动 Dangdai Zhongguo Shehui Liudong (Mobility in Contemporary Chinese Society)*, Beijing, Social Sciences Academic Press.

<sup>25</sup> He Li, “Middle Class: Friends or Foes to Beijing’s New Leadership”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 8 Nos. 1&2, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> “How to Optimize Social Structure in China?”, *People’s Daily* (online edition), 16<sup>th</sup> August 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Li Chunling, “中产阶级: 中国社会值得关注的人群 Zhongchan Jieceng: Zhongguo shehui zhide guanzhu de renqun” (“The Middle

<sup>21</sup> For different calculations of poverty in China, see Breslin, *China and the Global Political Economy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp.164-5.

<sup>22</sup> The following section is adapted from the discussion on class reformation in *ibid*, pp. 174-184.

these findings, arguing that the high percentages emerging from research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is a myth that has been used as a propaganda tool to laud the success of party policy in generating wealth and promoting a new *xiaokang* society. For example, the income criteria for the middle class in Beijing was only RMB10,000 a month (around US\$2,090 at the time), ensuring that a quarter of the Beijing population were included. More important, while a relatively high percentage of the population surveyed fell into at least one criterion, a mere 4.1 percent met all of them. Finally, the urban bias in the survey means that it is simply not possible to reach a national figure. Once this is taken into account, Li concludes that only 2.8 percent of the entire population – just over 35 million people – were really members of the middle class in 2004.<sup>28</sup> While this might represent the lowest possible calculation, the general point that it is easy to overestimate the true size of the middle class is important and well made.

Secondly, not least because the process of transformation is still very much ongoing, there is no solidity amongst emerging groups. Goodman may have argued that it is difficult to identify “a single identifiable social interest or propensity to action” over a decade ago, but the basic argument remains true today.<sup>29</sup> Despite the tendency for those 6,000 Chinese surveyed by Lu (et al) to categorise themselves as middle class, there is also a self-acknowledgement that they are not part of a homogenous group. The majority of the self-identified middle class placed themselves in either the fourth or fifth of ten possible ranks of who gets most from the distribution of “social resources”. State and social administrators were considered to be the main beneficiaries who occupied the first rank, private business owners came second, and management

personnel occupied the third rank.<sup>30</sup> This self analysis echoes Hong’s categorisation of three separate groups in the broadly defined middle classes: “new private entrepreneurs”, urban professionals, and “the managers, bureaucrats, and professionals” who service the capitalist classes.<sup>31</sup>

This brings us to the third reason. The new middle class should not be seen as necessarily separate from the state as large sections of the middle class are civil servants who benefit from the continued existence of authoritarian state power. As we have seen, the Chinese middle class differs from European understandings because it contains within it not only intellectuals, managers and professionals, but also “middle and lower-level cadres under the payroll of the party-state”.<sup>32</sup> Why should the middle class challenge the state for power when many of the middle class are part of the state apparatus and dependent on continued state power for their positions of relative privilege? As such, expectations that an emerging middle class will challenge existing elites for political power need to be modified to take into account the symbiotic rather than confrontational relationship between authoritarian political elites and the emerging middle class.

Even if we eschew the idea of a middle class and instead think in terms of new economic classes/elites, then the relationship between old and new elites remains very strong. Much of the non-state sector in contemporary China has its origins in the party-state sector that spawned it. Particularly at the local level, Party and state officials have used their political positions to increase their economic potential and bargaining power. For example, Dickson focuses on the emergence of new entrepreneurial elites from the ranks of the political elites, concentrating on the children of party-state officials, and those entrepreneurs who have

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Stratum: A group in Chinese Society Worth Paying Attention To”), in Ru Xin, Lu Xueyi, and Li Peilin (eds.) 2004 “年：中国社会形势分析与预测 2004 Nian: Zhongguo Shehui Xingshi Fenxi yu Yuce”, (“Analysis and Forecast of the Features of Chinese Society: 2004”), Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Press, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Chua Chin Hon, “Chinese Middle Class? It’s Just a Myth, Study Finds”, *The Straits Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Goodman, David, “In Search of China’s New Middle Classes: the Creation of Wealth and Diversity in Shanxi During the 1990s”, *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 22 No. 1, 1998, p.40.

<sup>30</sup> Lu, *Mobility in Contemporary Chinese Society*.

<sup>31</sup> Hong Zhaohui, “Mapping the Evolution and Transformation of the New Private Entrepreneurs in China”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 9 No.1, 2004, pp.25.

<sup>32</sup> He Li, “Middle Class: Friends or Foes to Beijing’s New Leadership”, p.89. See also Goodman, David, “Why China has no new Middle Class: Cadres, Managers and Entrepreneurs”, in Goodman, *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives*, pp. 23-37.

left formal political office to become economic elites – the process of *xiahai* 下海.<sup>33</sup> For Walder<sup>34</sup> and Li and Rozelle,<sup>35</sup> the focus is on forms of “insider privatisation” that have resulted in what Ding calls “nomenklatura capitalism”.<sup>36</sup>

However, the coalescence of political and new economic elites is not just a one-way process. Private entrepreneurs in China find it difficult to make headway unless they have a good relationship with the party-state elites. Even those who have no formal contacts with the party-state are essentially dependent on strong support from local authorities in order to survive. Successful “private” local enterprises usually succeed thanks to the protection and aid granted to them by local state elites. In an economy where land, raw materials, transport and financial capital are still in relatively short supply, occupying a gatekeeper role (or knowing somebody who does) has an important economic premium. As such, a form of business-local state is an essential prerequisite for successful economic activity. So the fourth explanation is that notwithstanding the liberalisation of the Chinese economy, the state remains hugely important. For example, Gallagher argues, the private sector cannot really challenge the existing power holders when it is largely dependent on those same power holders for access to capital and markets.<sup>37</sup> In short, while there is a growing private sector in China, this sector only flourishes because of its close relationship with the state. It is private, but it is not independent.

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<sup>33</sup> Dickson, Bruce, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Walder, Andrew, “Privatization and Elite Mobility: Rural China, 1979–1996”, Stanford Institute for International Studies A/PARC Working Paper, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Li Hongbin and Rozelle, Scott, “Privatizing Rural China: Insider Privatization, Innovative Contracts and the Performance of Township Enterprises”, *The China Quarterly*, No.176, 2003, pp.981–1005.

<sup>36</sup> Ding Xueliang, “Informal Privatization Through Internationalization: The Rise of Nomenklatura Capitalism in China’s Offshore Business”, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol.30 No.1, 2000, pp.121–46.

<sup>37</sup> Gallagher, Mary., *Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007.

The fifth explanation takes a slightly different slant on the same basic idea and argues that new elites don’t need to compete with the Party because the Party acts on their behalf. On the 80th anniversary of the creation of the CCP in 2001, Party leader Jiang Zemin called for private entrepreneurs to be allowed to join the Communist Party. Despite concern from within, the Party constitution was amended at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 to add Jiang’s theory of the “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao* 三个代表) to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought-Deng Xiaoping Theory as the Party’s guiding principle. As a result, the CCP now formally represents not just the Chinese proletariat, but also China’s advanced productive forces, China’s advanced culture, and “the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people”. As a consequence, the CCP is no longer just the vanguard of the proletariat, but of “Chinese People and the Chinese nation”, and membership is open to “any advanced element” including private entrepreneurs. The following year, the PRC constitution was also amended to not only include the “Three Represents” but also to commit the state to guarantee the right to have and inherit private property.

From this perspective, one-party rule increasingly looks like an authoritarian executive leadership acting on behalf of the bourgeoisie, rather than a people’s dictatorship. For Chen An:

“economic dependence upon the private sector has compelled the leadership to move to the right on the political spectrum and to bring its class orientation into line with its new developmental strategy”.<sup>38</sup>

This characterisation of Party rule has been made by Party officials themselves. In “How the Chinese Communist Party Should Lead the Capitalist Class”, Lin Yanzhi argued that a capitalist class had been produced by the Party, and was now seeking to take power by changing the character and class basis of the

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<sup>38</sup> Chen An, “Rising Class Politics and its Impact on China’s Path to Democracy”, *Democratization*, Vol.10, No. 2, 2003, p.150.

Party.<sup>39</sup> As Guo Baogang (2003: 15) argues, “the foundation of the communist rule used to be based on a socialist social contract between the party-state and the working class. At the end of Jiang’s tenure this contract was essentially non-existent”.<sup>40</sup>

However we want to term it, one of the features of the Chinese reform process is the transformation of relationships between existing state actors, and the changing bases of their power. There is a symbiotic relationship (at the very least) between state elites and new economic elites. They have effectively co-opted each other into an alliance that, for the time being, mutually reinforces each other’s power and influence, not to mention personal fortunes. What we see, then, is a process of reformulation of class alliances within China *and* the reformulation of the class basis of CCP rule. As such, demands for democratisation are diminished by the relationship between elites and the state and further reinforced by the two other pillars of legitimacy – stability and nationalism – which we shall now return to.

## Legitimacy and stability

Providing stability might not sound like the most ambitious goal for a government – it really should be the bottom line for any government. But in the Chinese case, it is important for two reasons. Firstly, we need to return to the issue of party evolution. Memories of the chaos and disorder of the Cultural Revolution remain alive today, and in 1978 simply not being the old Party and not being the Gang of Four and not pursuing leftist policies was enough to provide a considerable degree of support. Emphasising the difference between old and new polities has remained important ever since as the Party has changed from being a “revolutionary party” based on class struggle and mass mobilisation to a “ruling party” based on stability and order.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Wang Dan, “China Trying to Redefine the Party”, *Taipei Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Guo Baogang, “Political Legitimacy and China’s Transition”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol.8 Nos.1&2, p.15.

<sup>41</sup> Zheng Shiping, “Leadership Change, Legitimacy, and Party Transition in China”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol.8 Nos.1&2, 2003, p.54.

Secondly, while the chances of a return to Maoist radicalism have now disappeared, the potential for disorder remains alive. Or more correctly, it is *kept* alive as the discourse of potential instability, and the Party’s unique ability to prevent the slide into chaos has been carefully constructed and maintained by the Party itself. This quote from the 2006 White Paper on Building Political Democracy is rather long, but cited here in length as it sums up the argument and is emblematic of this type of constructed discourse:

“The CPC’s leadership and rule is needed for making the statepower stable. China is a vast country with a large population. There are great disparities in terms of development between urban and rural areas, and between different regions. It is of unusual significance for China to have a stable state power. Only then can China concentrate on construction and development, and only then can the country’s development strategy and goal of modernisation be pursued for a long time and through to the end. Only then can all kinds of unnecessary and unwanted internal political strife be minimised, all positive factors be exploited to the full, and all resources, strength and wisdom be pooled to tackle major problems that have a bearing on the nation’s economy and the people’s livelihood, and to ensure sustainable social and economic development.”<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, while stability might be an essential prerequisite for economic growth, rapid economic growth has exacerbated inequalities, and thereby made the need for stability even more pressing and urgent. Or put another way, growth and modernisation has generated so many tensions and changes that the need for a strong power to oversee this transformation and avoid a collapse into chaos is as great as ever.

Looking at the same phenomena from a different perspective, New Left critics argue that political authoritarianism is not so much compatible with economic liberalism as essential for it. The neoliberal

<sup>42</sup> State Council, *White Paper: Building of Political Democracy in China*.

project results in so much dislocation that it would simply be impossible to operate without the use of state force to suppress those who are damaged by its introduction:

“neoliberalism, in truth, relies upon the strength of transnational and national policies and economies, and it depends upon a theory and discourse of economic formalism to establish its own hegemonic discourse. As such, its extrapolitical and anti-state character is utterly dependent upon its inherent links to the state. That is, in the absence of such a policy/state premise, neoliberalism would be incapable of concealing unemployment, the decline of social security, and the widening gap between rich and poor using the mystifications of a ‘transitional period’.”<sup>43</sup> (Wang Hui 2004: 8)

So whether the Chinese people have been conned by these “mystifications” or not, the need for a strong state appears to have gained considerable purchase in Chinese society, and is often repeated as the reason why China does not need Western style democratisation (or at least, not at the moment). And accepting the caveat that openly demanding democracy can be dangerous, there also seems to be an association of democracy with, at least, instability and even disorder and chaos. As Zheng Yongnian notes:

“more and more people, many of whom were liberals in the 1980s, have grown suspicious of democracy. Some of these people have even openly opposed democracy.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, notwithstanding the need for a strong state to prevent a slide into chaos, there is another, altogether more positive reason for supporting the strong state model of government; the model seems to have worked in generating considerable economic growth and success.

There is an element of national pride that China’s way of doing things – economic liberalisation without Western style liberal democratisation – has worked, and is now being proposed in some areas as a model for others to follow. We might also note here that there has been at least some association of the potential for disorder with the underhand acts of foreign interests. For example, in 1989, *part* of the justification for the suppression of the 1989 movement was that US and Taiwanese interests were instigating unrest and violence designed to bring the system down. The charges against Zhao Ziyang and his key advisor Bao Tong were also framed partly in terms of national security and “revealing state secrets”. When the Democracy Wall was closed down, this too was linked with Taiwanese interests and the desire to overthrow the system, and recently arrested human rights activists have also been linked with taking advice and/or money from overseas groups.<sup>45</sup> Peerenboom notes that HIV activists have also been arrested for posting details on webpages, thus revealing them to an international audience and undermining China.<sup>46</sup> And of course, what happens in Tibet and Xinjiang is also framed in terms of national security and against the actions of external groups trying to split China. So whether inspired by pride or fear, the nation and the national interest are central to debates over democratisation and stability, which brings us to the rather important role of nationalism in Chinese debates over political reform.

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<sup>43</sup> Wang Hui, “The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China”, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol.12 No.1, 2004, p.8.

<sup>44</sup> Zheng Yongnian, “China as Originator of Ideas”, *China Review*, No.53, 2008, p.4

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<sup>45</sup> Watts, “Chinese dissident jailed for five years after human rights petition”.

<sup>46</sup> Peerenboom, *China Modernizes*, p.114.

# Nationalism and democracy in the People's Republic of China

Despite the promotion of apoliticism and the transition from revolutionary to ruling party, ideology is far from dead in contemporary China. It remains not only a powerful tool of state power, but also an extremely strong source of popular political motivation and action – indeed, at times the people seem more inspired to act than they did during the revolutionary era. Nonetheless, while China's leaders spend considerable time and effort redefining what socialism means in the contemporary Chinese context, the different adaptations of Marxism-Leninism are largely irrelevant to the debate here, where the focus is on nationalism.

In many respects, calling this Chinese nationalism an ideology is rather problematic. What we see in China seems to lack sufficient coherence and guiding principles to be counted as an ideology as such – it is not a “science of ideas”. Nonetheless, given the way in which it is promoted by the Chinese state as a programme and guide to action, perhaps it does deserve the epithet – though the Chinese authorities prefer the term “patriotism” – literally “love the country” (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) – rather than nationalism (*minzhu zhuyi* 民族主义).

Perhaps the best way of addressing the problem is to consider two different types of nationalism in China. The first is a state-sponsored ideology with a set of coherent ideas intended to influence the populace, legitimate the authoritarian political system, and provide a theoretical guide to action. The second nationalism is a catch-all term for a wide range of popular sentiments that lack internal coherence, but share basic assumptions about the hostile nature of the

international environment and the goal of restoring China to a perceived rightful position of a, if not the, global power.<sup>47</sup> These state and popular nationalisms have a lot in common in terms of their perceptions of the nature of international relations, and their objectives for national resurgence and regeneration. They also communicate with each other in a two-way feedback system – the official nationalist ideology might have inspired, legitimated and motivated popular nationalism, but the state now also finds itself having to respond to popular nationalist aspirations.

## Official nationalism and democracy

In terms of official policy, the promotion of nationalism has important implications for democratisation. Indeed, while I have suggested three pillars for legitimacy, the previous two are in many ways underpinned by nationalism and should perhaps more correctly be considered to be subsets of the overarching “national project”. There are perhaps two deeply interrelated strands here. The first relates to the primacy of building a strong economic base. As we have already seen, this is often officially explained in terms of the continued relative lack of development in China and the primacy of socio-economic rights over political rights. In short, Chinese people will have the luxury to worry about political rights when they no longer have to worry about more immediate material concerns (in some areas, they still have to worry about life-threatening poverty).

However, the primacy of the economic project is also explained in terms of creating a situation where China can compete on a global scale. For Hughes this was the starting point of the whole reform process initiated after 1978 – reforming the old system was justified and legitimated by the need to build a strong China that could resist (and even oppose) the existing hegemonic global order.<sup>48</sup> This not only legitimises the

<sup>47</sup> Zhao prefers to divide the discourse into three; state, intellectual and popular. See Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, Christopher., *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era*, London, Routledge, 2006.

maintenance of strong state power to build economic success but also, for Gallagher, has allowed the sort of radical reform to take place that led to democratisation in Eastern Europe, without similar demands in China. The core of her argument is that the introduction of foreign investment meant that those who clung to the old system were left behind and created internal competition that fragmented and split the working class. As such, privatisation and the breaking of the iron rice bowl was accepted in China as a matter of survival, rather than leading to disaffection and demands for political reform as in Eastern Europe. However, she also notes that such a transformation in China was made possible because it was wrapped up in wider debates over what was in the national interest, and how best to facilitate national regeneration:

“privatisation has become acceptable because it is justified in nationalistic terms – it will save Chinese industry from the threat of foreign competition.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the wide scale acceptance of the national project has effectively neutralised one of the key drivers of the demand for political reform in other economically liberalising communist party states.

The second issue relates to the relationship between democracy and Western imperialism. Even the strongest proponents of liberal political reform in China argue that it is not something that can come quickly, and is certainly not something that should be imposed on China from outside. For example, Yu Keping argues that China needs “incremental democracy” (*zengliang minzhu* 增量民主) that evolves as China evolves. Society needs to develop and the form of democracy that China will end up with needs to “fit” with these societal changes. As such, there are no models that can be a template for China because all societies are different (and should thus have different forms of democracy).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Gallagher, Mary., “Reform and Openness: Why China’s Economic Reforms Have Delayed Democracy”, *World Politics*, Vol.54 No.3, 2002, p.344.

<sup>50</sup> Yu Keping, *增量民主与善治* *Zengliang Minzhu yu Shanzhi* (Incremental Democracy and Good Government), Beijing, Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2003.

However, there is more to this than just promoting a domestic form of democracy. It is also about the West trying to impose its form of democracy on China for political reasons and establishing a correlation between democracy promotion now, and Western imperialism in the 19th century. As Wang argues in his exploration of how historical thinking is operationalised into political action in China:

“attempts at cultural characterisation are both temporal— after one culture encounters the other—and relational and/or relative—a culture acquires its distinctiveness only in comparison with the other.”<sup>51</sup>

For Wang, even since the Opium Wars, there have been ongoing attempts to emphasise the distinctiveness of Chinese culture and political culture not just in comparison to the West, but as a rejection of the West – a West which imposed its preferred world views and norms on China by force in the 19th century.

So it is not just that the West is trying to impose inappropriate political forms on China, but that this is part of a concerted Western effort to prevent China from rising. As the official communiqué from the fourth plenum of the 16th Central Committee put it, “the strategy of foreign forces to break up and Westernise China have not changed”.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the last time that the West imposed its norms and cultures on China, it resulted in the loss of the most basic and fundamental democratic right – national integrity was destroyed by foreign domination. As such, it is not just that Western democracy is non-Chinese or even anti-Chinese, it is actually anti-democratic in that it abrogated Chinese sovereignty in the 19th and 20th centuries, and threatens to deny the right to develop a domestic indigenous Chinese form of

<sup>51</sup> Wang, Q Edward, “Is There A Chinese Mode of Historical Thinking? A Cross-Cultural Analysis”, *History and Theory*, No.46, 2007, p.202.

<sup>52</sup> Central Committee, *中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定* *Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiaqiang Dangde Zhizheng Nengli Jianshe de Jueding* (The Party Central Committee Decision on Strengthening Governing Capacity Construction), available at <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2004/Sep/668376.htm> (in Chinese).

democracy today. Again, a rather lengthy quote from the Chinese White Paper on Democratic Governance seems appropriate here:

“Democracy is an outcome of the development of political civilisation of mankind. It is also the common desire of people all over the world. Democracy of a country is generated internally, not imposed by external forces. In the course of their modern history, the Chinese people have waged unrelenting struggles and made arduous explorations in order to win their democratic rights. But only under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) did they really win the right to be masters of the state. The Chinese people dearly cherish and resolutely protect their hard-earned democratic achievements.”<sup>53</sup>

The essential starting point for democracy under this approach is independence and sovereignty so that the people of a country can rule themselves. The revolution of 1949, by re-creating the nation state free from external control, achieved this basic democratic right and the CCP will do what it can to stop outsiders undermining this independence and sovereignty. China’s pre-revolutionary condition is still officially described as “semi-feudal, semi-colonial” (*ban fengjian, ban zhimindi* 半封建半殖民地) and the revolutionary struggle was always about freeing China from foreign domination as well as freeing the country from feudalism and the Guomindang. But under the above interpretation, the balance has tipped even further to considering the revolution as primarily a struggle for national independence - and Mao’s position as “father of the nation” rather than architect of radicalism has similarly been re-emphasised.

This idea that Western democracy is in some ways a means of containing China is compounded by a feeling that democracy and rights are not universally applied – that China is subjected to Western double standards. It is being treated as akin to a pariah state by countries that themselves do not conduct all of their affairs in

<sup>53</sup> State Council, *White Paper: Building of Political Democracy in China*.

keeping with democratic principles.<sup>54</sup> The US in particular is pushing China to democratise even though the Western countries didn’t do so at a similar stage of their political and economic evolution. Moreover, the West (again largely shorthand for the US) does not adhere to its own supposed bottom lines of democracy. It frequently abrogates democracy at home (China now produces its own annual report on human rights abuses in the US) and also overseas.

The search for double standards quickly rests on the US, the UK and their allies abrogating the fundamental democratic and human right of sovereignty in Iraq. The definition of what is and who deserves democracy and rights remains the preserve of the most powerful state in the global system. And of course what has happened in Guantanamo Bay in the name of the US and its allies does not serve the goal of democracy promotion well. Indeed, for Zheng Yognian (2008: 4) “Western” democracy has now got such a bad name that Yu Keping felt the need to remind the people it wasn’t all bad in 2007:

“Last year, when Yu Keping wrote an article entitled ‘Democracy is a Good Thing’, many people outside China considered it as a sign of progress in China’s political reform. In reality, more and more people, many of whom were liberals in the 1980s, have grown suspicious of democracy. Some of these people have even openly opposed democracy. Yu Keping was brave enough then to tell people that democracy was still a good thing.”<sup>55</sup>

This is not a universally shared view of what Yu was actually trying to do, but is nevertheless an apt description of how democracy is often associated with negatives in China today – with imperialism, with hegemony and with duplicity.

Moreover, this rejection of foreign models is reinforced by the above mentioned new sense of pride in China’s economic successes – what Whiting termed “affirmative nationalism”. Or perhaps more correctly,

<sup>54</sup> Peerenboom, *China Modernizes*, p.165.

<sup>55</sup> Zheng, “China as Originator of Ideas”, p.4.

not just pride that China has succeeded, but that it has succeeded despite not giving in and following the supposedly superior Western model and despite external groups trying to prevent China's development.<sup>56</sup>

## Towards Chinese exceptionalism?

The position above posits firstly that the West uses democracy only when it wants to, and second that China is doing things its own way. Of course, it does not necessarily mean that China is unique – or more correctly, any more unique than any other country as the logical extension of the argument is that each country will develop its own distinctive form of democracy. But the logical extension of the argument is not always made, and it often seems as if China is posited as being “uniquely unique” – that there is a form of “Chinese exceptionalism”.

For example, Chun-chieh Huang argues that:

“Imbued with profound historical consciousness, the Chinese people are *Homo historiens* in every sense of the term. To be human in China, to a very large extent, is to be historical, which means to live up to the paradigmatic past.”<sup>57</sup>

and:

“The Chinese mind centers on and revolves around history. In China, to be human is to be historical. The Chinese people believe that we are human because we think and behave historically. Thus, to understand Chinese culture, and how peculiar it is, it is important to understand what history is, and how historical thinking works.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Whiting also identified an “aggressive nationalism” where an external enemy is identified that has to be dealt with for China's interests to be secured (something akin to an “antagonistic contradiction” in Maoist terms). Whiting, Alan, “Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy after Deng”, *The China Quarterly*, No.142, 1995, pp.297–315.

<sup>57</sup> Huang Chun-chieh, “The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking”, *History and Theory*, May 2007, p.180.

<sup>58</sup> Huang, “The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking”, pp.184-5.

We might suggest that this is a rather stark delineation between China and the “other” – even if we put the validity of the assumption about China to one side, it implies that this is not the case elsewhere and that other cultures and societies are “different”.

Huang's arguments here are framed in terms of a debate over the distinctiveness of Chinese/Asian historiography vis-à-vis “Western” alternatives (and indeed, the debate over whether there really is distinctiveness). It is a position that is much challenged, and I do not have the space or indeed the knowledge to engage with that specific debate here. Rather, I refer to it here for two interrelated reasons.

Firstly, in some respects, it is the very fact that Huang and others feel that China is different that is important (rather than whether it is correct). There is a belief that China is different and that Chinese culture is different; and that the West and Westerners think in different ways which make it difficult for them to understand the nature of this difference and what it means for the way that history is transmitted into contemporary political and social spheres. Secondly, Huang is not a product of the PRC academic system and linked to the official state structure. Rather, he is an academic from Taiwan who has also written on the distinctiveness of Chinese culture (and its adaptations) in explaining political change there. This is something that Huang and others think is embedded in history and culture – a history and culture mediated by the political system, but not created and/or embedded in the political system *per se*.

The boundaries between highlighting difference on the one hand, and exceptionalism on the other, are far from clear. Much of what is posited as difference is often actually constructed on understandings of Chinese uniqueness. For example, Wang Shaoguang has basically argued that political theories and concepts developed outside China are not applicable for studying China as they are not “localised” or embedded within China's distinct social, political and historical context.<sup>59</sup> You could say the same about other societies

<sup>59</sup> Wang Shaoguang (2003) “接轨还是拿来: 政治学本土化的思考” “Jiegui” Haishi “Nalai”: Zhengzhixue Bentuhua de Sikao (“Catching

– that foreign concepts and theories are not applicable to Morocco or Peru or anywhere else. But I get the feeling that what Wang really means is that China is unique and different. And this conception of Chinese uniqueness is part of official discourses as well. The quotations above from the White Paper on Political Democracy give a hint of this, but perhaps the White Paper on the Rule of Law issued in February 2008 goes a step further:

“China has a 5,000-year history of civilisation. And the Chinese legal system goes back to ancient times. As early as in the 21st century BC, consuetudinary law appeared in China’s slave society. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC), written law was promulgated in China, and a systematic written code of laws appeared. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), China had a fairly complete code of feudal laws, which was passed on and developed in the following feudal dynasties. The Chinese system of law emerged as a unique one in the world.”<sup>60</sup>

It is now becoming common for non-Chinese academics at workshops and conferences to be told that they do not understand China and their observations are consequently invalid. Interestingly, while Western academics like to consider themselves independent thinkers, they often seem to be received in China as if they are representatives or agents of the West or of their home country. This might in part result from different expectations of roles and responsibilities.<sup>61</sup> It might also be part of a concerted effort to silence criticism – perhaps based on a hypersensitivity that perceives criticism and “China bashing” when it isn’t really there. But whether real or

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Up or Borrowing: Reflections on the Localisation of Political Science” in Gong Yang (ed) “思潮: 中国“新左派”及其影响 *Sichao – Zhongguo ‘Xinzuopai’ Jiqi Yingxiang*” (*Ideological Trends - China’s New Left and Their Influence*), Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Press, pp.227-257.

<sup>60</sup> State Council, *White Paper: China’s Efforts and Achievements in Promoting the Rule of Law*, Beijing, Information Office of the State Council.

<sup>61</sup> And conversely, Chinese scholars and officials (and those scholar-officials that seem to span the divide) appear to outsiders to be defending Chinese positions and acting as representatives or agents of China’s official policy.

constructed for other reasons, the idea that non-Chinese people might “know” – *zhidao* 知道 – China but cannot fully understand it – *liaojie* 了解 – reinforces the idea that conceptions of “Chinese exceptionalism” are beginning to take hold in some quarters at least.

## Popular nationalism and democracy

This understanding of uniqueness and exceptionalism is shared by wide sections of the Chinese populace. So too is the idea that the West either simply doesn’t understand this uniqueness or is deliberately trying to attack China. The popular Chinese response to the demonstrations when the Olympic Torch was on its global tour is instructive here. The general sentiment in China was that the country had been insulted and some arranged a boycott of French goods; a quick google search in Chinese on *dizhi faguo* (boycott France) (on 5<sup>th</sup> June) generated over half a million hits. One headline in *The People’s Daily* online edition sums up the general feeling that China’s great moment of national pride was being hijacked by the West – “Why some Western media wage ‘asymmetric warfare’ on China”.<sup>62</sup> In this atmosphere, that combines hurt with pride and exceptionalism, it is almost as if democracy promotion is bundled together with not just attacks on the torch, but everything that the West has done to damage/hurt China since the Opium Wars.

The Chinese media has been at the forefront of a campaign to highlight the West’s insults to China during the torch tour. According to He Yanan, when it comes to relations with Japan, through education, government statements, the media and even the entertainment industry, official China is promoting “pernicious myths in the national collective memory. Fuelling mistrust and exacerbating a mutual threat perception”.<sup>63</sup> So it would be foolish to consider popular nationalism as in some ways separate from

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<sup>62</sup> Available at:

<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91342/6393940.html>

<sup>63</sup> He Yanan, “History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16 No.50, 2007, p.1.

official nationalism – as somehow existing independent of the political system. But at times, these nationalisms do not coincide and the highest level of leadership finds itself under criticism for not doing enough to defend China's national interests. This is in no small part a result of the state projecting itself as a force for national salvation and promotion domestically, but a force for peace and stability externally. When it comes to international "crises", policy is based much more on pragmatism and accommodation than on the nationalist ideology that is projected for internal consumption only. As a result, as Shen has demonstrated, the state frequently finds itself criticised by the people for not acting as it should to protect Chinese interests and to impose Chinese supremacy. Notably, internet discussion groups, bulletin boards and blogs have become the main means by which this criticism is articulated – so the spread of the internet has become a force for criticising the state as many predicted; but not to demand greater democracy, but rather greater nationalist resolve.<sup>64</sup>

There are many examples of such internet nationalism – the most recent example was the response to the Chinese government's request to the Japanese to send disaster relief forces to help after the Sichuan Earthquake. The flood of postings referring to, amongst other things, the attack on Chinese dignity resulted in the Japanese government deciding not to send aid.<sup>65</sup> But in many respects, it was the Chinese government that was under criticism here for asking the Japanese for help, rather than the Japanese for offering it.

## Popular nationalism, the national project and criticising the state

The example of internet nationalism suggests that one of the arenas where we might expect society to demand political reform and democratisation has instead become a forum for demanding nationalism – for

<sup>64</sup> Shen, Simon., *Redefining Nationalism in Modern China: Sino-American Relations and the Emergence of Chinese Public Opinion in the 21st Century*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Hiroyuki Sugiyama, "Chinese Net forums swamped by anti-SDF posts", *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008.

demanding that the Party do more for the national project. In some respects, the same can be said about at least two of the major waves of criticism in the post-Mao era (and perhaps all three). If we can divide these waves of criticism into three, the second in the mid- to late-1990s saw the growth of nationalist and even xenophobic stances to the extent that the CCP found itself struggling to keep the lid on the nationalism that it itself had helped generate.<sup>66</sup> This was manifest in the publication of a number of bestselling works that portrayed the US as mistakenly attempting to impose its inferior norms and values on China, and calling for China to resist the global hegemon. Most famously, the highly popular *China Can Say No* railed against the US as the self-imposed creator of international norms, and the self-appointed adjudicator of right and wrong. China was a great civilisation which should resist American hegemony and strive to exert itself over the global hegemon.<sup>67</sup> In 1997, Liu Xiguang and Liu Kang produced *Behind the Demonisation of a China* which similarly argued that Western powers (essentially shorthand for the US) were trying to force Western cultures and values on developing countries like China, through the expansion of Western media into the developing world.<sup>68</sup>

*China's Path Under the Shadow of Globalisation* called for a much more aggressive (or at least assertive) response to any US attempt to harm China's interests.<sup>69</sup> Although this book was self-consciously written as a continuation of the "Say No" literature, by focusing on the potential impact of economic globalisation in general and WTO entry in particular, it represents something of a link to the third wave of

<sup>66</sup> Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era*.

<sup>67</sup> Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, Gu Qingzheng, and Tang Zhengyu, *中国可以说 No Zhongguo Keyi Shuo Bu (China Can Say No)*, Beijing, Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Press, 1996. For a good overview of this literature in general, see Des Forges, Roger, and Luo Xu, "China as a Non-Hegemonic Superpower? The Use of History among the China Can Say No Writers and Their Critics", *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol.33 No.4, 2001, pp.483-507.

<sup>68</sup> Liu Xiguang, and Liu Kang, *妖魔化中国的背后 Yaomohua Zhongguo de Beihou (Behind the Demonisation of China)*, Beijing, China Social Sciences, 1997.

<sup>69</sup> Fang Ning, Wang Xiaodong, and Song Qiang, *“全球化阴影下的中国之路 Quanqiuhua Yinying xia de Zhongguo Zhilu” (China's Path Under the Shadow of Globalisation)*, Beijing, China Social Science Press, 1999.

critical writing associated with the New Left. Whilst originally referring to a relatively small group of critical writers, the term New Left is at times used as an umbrella term for all of those who criticise the negative consequences of economic liberalisation (and a term that not all such writers appreciate, as it has connotations of previous periods of leftism in China and suggests an untrue desire to return to the radical Maoist paradigm). Indeed, Wang Hui has criticised many of those with whom he has been grouped together for not opposing neoliberalism *per se*, but simply opposing the speed and/or extent of liberalisation at a specific moment in time (particularly in relation to China's WTO entry).<sup>70</sup>

Whilst the main focus of these critical thinkers is the negative consequences of economic reform (which is discussed further below), they do not ignore the fact that neoliberal theory originated outside China. This was particularly the case during the negotiations over China's WTO entry (the inspiration for "China's Path") and during the early days of post-2001 implementation. For critics, the government was in danger of abandoning China's interests to those of (foreign) neoliberalism and/or Western interests. But it goes beyond just the economic context – for example, Lu Di argues that transnational media corporations are part of a cultural invasion enforcing foreign values on China in the same way that the British enforced change on China through the Opium Wars.<sup>71</sup>

In highlighting the growth of inequality and other societal issues, New Left writers are partly concerned about what this means for those affected. But, I would contend that the fundamental concern is what this means for China – for the national project. If this can be termed a movement, it is a movement that is essentially concerned with how best to serve Chinese interests in a dangerous international environment and

how best to promote the resurgence of China. For some of these writers at least, this is something that can be best achieved by a strong state.

In *Collision*, Han Deqiang (2000) argued that what China needed was less Adam Smith and more Friedrich List.<sup>72</sup> List argued that England (and he always referred to England) only promoted free trade because it benefited England – there was nothing evangelical about the spread of liberal economics, but simply national interest. Indeed, although England promoted free trade when it was beneficial – for example, in trade with continental Europe – it maintained strong protection if the terms of trade favoured others and free trade would harm English producers. The solution, for List, was to become detached from the global economy to protect infant industries from competition, build a strong economy through state-directed and funded projects, and then re-engage with the global economy from a position of strength. Economies were fundamentally "national" and the global economy was an arena where national economies competed for power and wealth.<sup>73</sup> If we combine this with the discussion over the West's selected use of democracy promotion (and ignoring rights and democracy in Iraq), then we end up with a situation where the West only promotes its values – be they economic or political – when it serves the interests of the West and ignores them when they get in the way.

Although the majority of writers do not specifically engage with List's work, these ideas are redolent in much of the New Left literature (and in many of the popular sentiments encountered in taxis and restaurants in China). Indeed, some are perhaps not so much the New Left as the "new nationalists". Their solution is in part to demand democracy, but not liberal democracy. There is a demand for the system to

<sup>70</sup> Wang Hui, "The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China"

<sup>71</sup> Lu Di, "鸦片战争、胶州湾和国际化 Yopian Zhanzheng Jiaopian Zhanzheng he Guojihua" ("The Opium War, Film War and Internationalisation"), in Yin Hong (ed.) 全球化和媒体 *Quanjihua he Meiti (Globalisation and Media)*, Beijing, Qinghua University Press, 2002, pp.217-228. I am grateful to the late Zeng Huaguo for this observation.

<sup>72</sup> Han Deqiang, 碰撞: 全球化陷阱与中国现实选择 *Pengzhuang: Quanjihua Xianjing yu Zhongguo Xianshi Xuanze (Collision: The Globalisation Trap and China's Real Choice)*, Beijing, Economic Management Press, 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Of course there is more to List than just this. His "National System of Political Economy" was first published in 1841, and being out of copyright, is now freely available, including at <http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/list/national.htm>.

become more responsive to their interests and to the interests of those who have been left behind in the transition from socialism. Furthermore, they want the party-state to get its own house in order to deal with outright corruption and the relationship between political power/influence and economic gain more broadly (even when it isn't illegal). But they also demand a stronger state to defend China in a hostile international environment and also to put in place state welfarism and social safety nets. It is not state power *per se* that is the problem, but the nature of state power in China – its relatively closed and self-serving nature, and its over-emphasis on generating growth rather than distributing the benefits of growth more equitably. In fact, at times the state is criticised for not being powerful enough, and allowing liberalism – even worse, foreign liberalism – to harm Chinese people and undermine the power of the Chinese state.

### *The national project and 1989*

Having briefly covered the second and third waves of criticism, we now return to the first major wave that led to Tiananmen in 1989. It is incredibly difficult to say anything definitive about the extent to which this was a democracy movement for two reasons. Firstly, sentiments, emotions and demands evolved both during the occupation of the square and after its clearance. Secondly, this was not a cohesive movement and was instead characterised more by diversity than common purpose. So with these important caveats in mind, I suggest here that Tiananmen was also in large part, and in its aspirations, about the national project and not (initially at least) an anti-system movement.

In traditional China, intellectuals (*zhishifenzi* 抵制法国) were expected to play the role of the more moral conscience of the imperial system – they had a right and a duty to expose problems on behalf of the general population. With the collapse of the empire, students and intellectuals became the vanguards of the new China, debating and introducing new ideas in the May Fourth movement to replace the outdated and defeated ideas of traditional China. But while these new ideas were largely Western creations – liberalism, social

Darwinism, socialism and anarchism – they were embraced as a means of saving and reinvigorating China. For many of those who brought the CCP to power in 1949, promoting communism, like the movement that went before and Deng's transition from socialism that came after, was a means to achieve China's restoration. In many respects, the students took on these dual historical roles in 1989, associating themselves with both the loyal critics of traditional China and the innovators and saviours of the nation from the first quarter of the 20th century. Moreover, there was a feeling that this generation had been forced into action because of the sell-out of the older generation. Establishment intellectuals had been co-opted to become part of the system rather than "loyal" critics from without, while government officials were too concerned with their own positions and privilege to provide the leadership the people needed.

Furthermore, student activism did not emerge from a void, and previous bouts of activism occurred with at least some official approval.<sup>74</sup> For example, demonstrations against Japanese imports (perceived as being dumped on China) in 1985 were not opposed by the state, even if they were not part of an officially sanctioned movement. Demonstrations in 1986 calling for more democracy were inspired by the then Party leader Hu Yaobang's own call for a search for new ways to democratise the Party – to make the system more transparent and fair rather than to overthrow it. And in retrospect, perhaps we can identify the Christmas 1988 protests against African students in Nanjing as the start of what became Tiananmen 1989. While antipathy towards African students had long run deep, in Nanjing it escalated into complaints about the much better treatment and conditions that international students – and "even African students!" – enjoyed compared to Chinese university students. This in turn escalated into a call for Chinese students to be given human rights.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Crane, George., "Collective Identity, Symbolic Mobilization, and Student Protest in Nanjing, China, 1988-1989", *Comparative Politics*, Vol.26 No.4, pp.395-413.

<sup>75</sup> Sullivan, Michael., "The 1988-89 Nanjing Anti-African Protests: Racial Nationalism or National Racism?", *The China Quarterly*, No.138, 1994, pp.438-457.

In some ways, the 1989 movement was a movement of student self-interest aimed at redressing specific grievances under the banner of a national patriotic campaign – against the lack of choice and individual freedom outlined early in this paper, but also against boring and poor classes, compulsory political education classes, student dorms with 12 to a room and only an hour’s hot water a day, along with terrible food. And at the end of it all, there was the prospect of poor wages in state jobs, compared to the newly rich 10,000 Yuan rural households, and the massive privileges and wealth of the sons and daughters of the Party. This relative deprivation also points to Tiananmen as a movement against corruption – perhaps even in a shadow of the Cultural Revolution, a movement against a political system that denied access to outsiders, and ran the system for the benefit of insiders.

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## Making authoritarianism work

### Demanding democratisation: transparency and legalism

So alongside calls for democracy (meaning different things to different people) nationalism and the desire for national regeneration was at least part of the inspiration for what happened in 1989. So too was the desire to make the Party less introverted – more open to new ideas, new people and new processes; to make the Party live up to its promise of a new “socialist democracy” of transparency, predictability and legality and to deal with the corruption that seemed to be providing all the benefits of economic reform to the sons and daughters of the elites.

Such demands have been repeated more recently by not just the New Left generation, but by Chinese from every political persuasion and group, including from

within the CCP itself. People also want the state to actually do in practice what it already says that it does – to actually implement at the local level laws that are passed at the centre – and perhaps most clearly of all to listen to what they have to say. Moreover, it is not necessarily matters of high politics that generate popular concern, but instead the feeling that the normal person is often ignored, even when it comes to rather mundane decisions that nevertheless affect their daily lives. I was particularly taken by an article in the *China Daily* complaining that urban renewal projects in Beijing had resulted in pavements being “reduced to the point where they were barely wide enough for foot traffic. Pedestrians had to be tightrope walkers or at least tiptoe to make their way” because nobody had thought to ask local inhabitants what they actually wanted from this renewal.

If we look into the miscalculated city renewal projects and other developments that are making people suffer, we see they have one thing in common: public participation was missing from the decision-making process. In the absence of public participation, decision-makers who are preoccupied with solving specific problems are likely to neglect some people’s long-term interests. The results could benefit some people at the expense of others, such as cutting into sidewalks to make room for automobiles. If the decision-makers are influenced by selfish advisors who have personal interests at stake in such projects, the results could be even worse.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, there is a simple demand for honesty. As with the provision of stability above, this might not sound like anything more than a very basic task. But when it came to the SARs outbreak, or indeed the aforementioned explosion at the school in Fanglin, the official response was in many ways worse than the crises themselves. For Ngkok, the SARs outbreak brought home to what was then the new leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao the extent to which the party-state structure had lost touch with the needs and

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<sup>76</sup> Available at: [http://www.china.org.cn/government/opinions/2008-03/01/content\\_11211953.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/opinions/2008-03/01/content_11211953.htm).

demands of the normal people.<sup>77</sup> It is not so much that the Party failed to secure the individual human security of those affected by the outbreak as the way that the system failed to tell the people what was happening (around 349 people died in China from SARs – which is clearly important but relatively minor compared to those who die from other diseases in China every year). Officials not only lied to the people but lied to each other and gave the impression of a network of officials solely concerned with saving face and their own positions, rather than saving those who were most at risk and dependent on the system for not just health care but reliable information.

As a quick aside here, it is interesting to compare this with the state's response to the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province. At first sight, the two crises are not readily comparable. Although SARs did have victims, the longer-term problem was more to do with the (non)governance of risk. After the earthquake, while the risk of aftershocks, floods and disease were important, there were more tangible and direct challenges to govern in terms of saving the trapped and finding food and shelter for the homeless. Nevertheless, the very open and transparent way in which the earthquake was dealt with shows a party-state that was not only helping the people, but keen to show the people that it was helping the people. The army were the peoples' saviours, and the party-state had nothing to hide. Helping those affected and not helping officials cover their own backs was what was important now – and if corruption had had anything to do with the speed at which some buildings collapsed, then this would be dealt with openly once the immediate crisis was dealt with. Notably, however, this new openness was not unconditional, and foreign reporters and those protesting against the collapse of schools were removed (at the very least) the second the protests began to appear coordinated and out of the state's control. While the Party encourages "managed

participation",<sup>78</sup> it reacts very differently when it feels that it cannot control or manage political action and participation – a tension that we will return to towards the end of the paper.

## Supplying democratisation

Whilst China's leaders have long been aware of these challenges, the fourth plenum of the 16<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in September 2004 marked the start of a renewed focus on the failings of the Party's leadership or ruling capacity (*zhizheng nengli* 执政能力). Both "history" and the "Chinese People" had "chosen" the Party to rule, but its continued tenure in power could not be taken for granted. Using a traditional Chinese idiom or "*chengyu*" and referring to official studies of the collapse of communist party regimes further west, it argued that "We must prepare for danger in a time of peace (*居安思危* *juansiwei*), heighten an awareness of suffering, and draw deep lessons from the experience of ruling parties across the world" and echoing Mao's aforementioned order to "serve the people", "from start to finish, carry out good government for the people". In conclusion, "constructing a clean and honest administration and fighting corruption are a matter of life and death for the Party".<sup>79</sup>

In recent years, debates over political reform and the need to democratise (albeit to democratise with Chinese characteristics) have been at the forefront of political debates amongst intellectuals – many of them with close links to the Party. Xie Tiao has called for greater popular participation with comments that seem to indicate that Leninist-Marxism was nothing but a way of cheating the people (albeit specifically referring to the Soviet people and not overtly referring to the cheating of the Chinese people). Like the research team under Zhang Xiaojin at Renmin University before in the 1980s, Xie Tao has looked to Scandinavia and particularly the Swedish model of

<sup>77</sup> Ngok, Kinglun, "State Capacity, Policy Learning and Policy Paradigm Shift: The Case of the Implementation of the 'Theory of Scientific Development' in China", Paper presented at the International Conference on the State Capacity of China in the 21st Century, Hong Kong, April 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Shai Yongcun, "Managed Participation in China", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119 No. 3, 2004, pp. 425-451.

<sup>79</sup> Central Committee, 中共中央关于加强党的 ..... *Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiaqiang Dangde* .... Author's translation, others may differ. As far as I am aware, this communiqué is not available in full form on the internet in English.

social(ist) democracy for lessons that the Chinese leadership can learn in undertaking political system reform.<sup>80</sup> The above mentioned Yu Keping has made similar calls for fuller popular participation, as aptly summed up by Fewsmith:

“Yu discusses the importance of citizen participation, which he sees as important to enhancing the stability of the society, restraining the abuse of power, and bringing about better policy. He calls for the government to open up more channels for citizen participation by establishing specific laws and mechanisms that would regulate their participation.”<sup>81</sup>

Without wishing to take this too far, what the leadership and what we might call “Party associated academics” are now saying is similar to what the demonstrators were saying in 1989. As already noted, this has something – and I stress only *something* – in common with the critiques of the Cultural Revolution. The argument that the Party had become both isolated and insulated from the people has some salience today. Isolated in terms of having different sets of interests and demands than the normal people, and insulated in that there were few effective and functioning channels of interest articulation. Particularly, but not only, at the very local level, power holders were more interested in networks of relationships with the old political structure and the new rich and tended to ignore what the people wanted. Mao’s solution in the 1960s was to immerse the cadres in the masses – a process that probably went beyond what even he expected and wanted as the radicalism eventually paralysed the party-state structure and all but led to civil war in some parts of China. This is not the intention today. Rather, it is to re-engage the party-state with the people. This occurs in four ways.

Firstly, the leadership has renewed its commitment to promoting equitable growth, and dealing with those

<sup>80</sup> Xie Tao, “民主社会主义模式与中国前途 Minzhu Shehui Zhuyi Moshi yu Zhongguo Qiantu” (“The Democratic Socialist Model and China’s Future”), 炎黄春秋 *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (Annals), No.2, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Fewsmith, Joseph, “Democracy Is a Good Thing”, *China Leadership Monitor*, No.22, p.3.

who have been left behind by providing more social welfare. Whether this constitutes a new fourth pillar of legitimacy to add to the three outlined earlier in this paper, or whether it is simply a rethinking of the existing balance between stability and growth, is something that is yet to become clear. The rhetoric appears to suggest a new paradigm, but as I have argued elsewhere, the actual policies are not quite the radical departures from the *status quo ante* as the current leadership might want us to believe.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, there is yet another widespread and high-profile campaign against corruption. Thirdly, there have been key policy changes intended to reduce the way in which officials can exert their influence over the population. Fees have been abolished and transferred to more transparent and predictable taxes, and land rights have been enshrined (alongside a campaign to enforce the law – something which has not always been the case). In keeping with the understanding that what is said in Beijing doesn’t always happen on the ground, these have been supported by high-profile and costly enforcement campaigns.

Finally, the Party is promoting democratisation. For example, during the 17<sup>th</sup> PC in 2007, Hu Jintao mentioned democracy over 60 times in his work report.<sup>83</sup> But we need to take care in understanding what exactly is meant by democracy and democratisation, which is defined here as putting sovereignty back in the hands of the people. Or as Xie Tao claims Hu Jintao had himself argued in France in 2007, the Party is “resolutely committed” to promoting political system reform and “perfecting a socialist democratic system” that guarantees full participation in democratic elections, “democratic decision making, and democratic supervision of power”.<sup>84</sup> This can and does entail the extension of

<sup>82</sup> Breslin, Shaun, “Do Leaders Matter? Chinese Politics, Leadership Transition and the 17th Party Congress”, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.14 No.2, 2008, pp.215-231.

<sup>83</sup> But as with the new economic paradigm, it is not quite as new as it might appear at first sight. In his report to the previous 16<sup>th</sup> PC, Jiang Zemin mentioned “democracy” 33 times, and if you add on the occasions of “democratic” then the total gets close to Hu’s.

<sup>84</sup> Xie Tao, “The Democratic Socialist Model and China’s Future”. Authors translation – note that *chong fen* is translated here as “full”, but can also be “ample” which has a slightly different nuance.

elections to more levels of the political system – something that is likely to continue to expand in the future. But when the Chinese talk about democratisation, what they are really referring to is making the existing one-party state more democratic – increasing transparency, predictability and the rule of law – and more efficient.

Pan Wei argues that rather than talk about democratisation, we should instead talk about the expansion of *fazhi* 法治.<sup>85</sup> *Fazhi* can be translated as rule of law, but when used in China, it does not have the same connections with the provision of basic political and human rights as it does in the West. Rather, it entails ensuring that the legal system is in place and functioning effectively to allow citizens knowledge of what they can and cannot do; and also of what party-state officials can and cannot do and the ability to challenge illegal action through the courts. Democracy in this sense entails giving the individual protection from the arbitrary power of the party-state. The individual will also become *more* empowered through the (re)appointment of *more* officials becoming subject to popular affirmation through the ballot box. In combination, these “democratising” proposals are intended to change the nature of the Party’s relationship with the people. They are also intended to provide new checks and balances on the power of individual leaders to pervert or ignore official policy. As Yu Keping has argued, the key challenge to the introduction of a new legally based political system is those Party cadres who utilise the opacity of the current system in the pursuit of self interest. In this respect, democratisation is about enforcing the central leadership’s authority over the political system – if you like, a new alliance between the top leaders and the people to ensure that both of their interests are represented by local leaders who occupy the key link positions between the people and the system. Indeed, simply doing in practice what is actually already legislated for was one of the key proposals in the official 2008 White Paper on the rule of law:

“In some regions and departments, laws are not observed, or strictly enforced, violators are not brought to justice; local protectionism, departmental protectionism and difficulties in law enforcement occur from time to time; some government functionaries take bribes and bend the law, abuse their power when executing the law, abuse their authority to override the law, and substitute their words for the law, thus bringing damage to the socialist rule of law; and the task still remains onerous to strengthen education in the rule of law, and enhance the awareness of law and the concept of the rule of law among the public.”<sup>86</sup>

However, it is not just about sorting out the Party’s own structures (not least to make local leaders more accountable to other parts of the Party). Democratisation is also about creating a more transparent and predictable policy-making process that can accommodate more of the diverse interests and demands that exist in an increasingly diverse and complex Chinese society. For example, a common theme that emerged from interviews conducted with think tanks, academics and business associations in Beijing in September 2007<sup>87</sup> was that the Party was in a listening mode. In contrast to the previous leadership, where a preferred group of advisers had tended to dominate, a wide set of individuals and institutions were now being invited to conferences and workshops and even private audiences to discuss their areas of interest and expertise. Indeed, we might be at the beginning of a third wave of thought liberation (following the original reform and Deng Xiaoping’s reinvigoration of reform in 1992) as the old ways of thought simply cannot deal with the new (and old) challenges facing the leadership today.<sup>88</sup> There is no

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<sup>86</sup> State Council, *White Paper: China’s Efforts and Achievements in Promoting the Rule of Law*.

<sup>87</sup> For a project on human rights in Sino-African relations with Ian Taylor, see: Breslin, Shaun., and Taylor, Ian., “Explaining the rise of ‘Human Rights’ in Analyses of Sino-African Relations”, *Review of African Political Economy*, No.115, 2008, 59-71.

<sup>88</sup> Wang Jianmin, “中共发起第三次思想解放运动” *Zhonggong Faqi di sancì Sixiang Jiefang Yundong* (“The Central Committee Initiates the Third Thought Liberation Campaign”), 14 January 2008, available at <http://www.fhy.net/cgi-bin/anyboard.cgi/collections?cmd=get&cG=1383633323&zu=3138363332&v=2&gV=0&p=>

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<sup>85</sup> Debating Pan Wei’s ideas was the focus of an edited collection; Zhao Suisheng (ed.), *Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law Vs. Democratization*, Armonk, Sharpe, 2006.

guarantee that these voices will be acted upon, those consulted still constitute a rather narrow section of society (including those who would be considered “insiders” in Western conceptions) and clearly this remains a million miles away from one person one vote. But all those interviewed agreed that the current leadership appeared at least to be more open to a wider range of opinions and proposed solutions than before.

## Conclusions: towards democratisation with Chinese characteristics

When Francis Fukayama announced that we were at “the end of history”, he was not saying that non-liberal democratic regimes would necessarily and inevitably collapse in the immediate future.<sup>89</sup> Authoritarian regimes might survive, but there was no longer any real belief that these regimes could provide a better alternative than free market capitalism. Moreover, we should remember here that, first, Fukayama was talking about the spread of not just political but also economic liberalism, and second, the original version appeared in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989 when communist party states were still alive and well and trying to find new ways of cementing one-party rule, rather than undergoing democratisation.<sup>90</sup> In particular, while some had held the profound belief and hope that they could construct a socialist state that was politically and economically superior to the Western alternative in the 1960s, by the end of the 1980s this belief and hope had gone – not least because of the discrediting of the Maoist alternative to soviet socialism in the

<sup>89</sup> Though he did think that Chinese students studying overseas would be a catalyst for democratic change when they returned home to work in China. “It is hard to believe that when they return home to run the country they will be content for China to be the only country in Asia unaffected by the larger democratizing trend.” Fukayama, Francis., “The End of History”, *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, pp.3-18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Cultural Revolution, and the subsequent move towards liberalising economic reform in China:

“The central issue is the fact that the People’s Republic of China can no longer act as a beacon for illiberal forces around the world... Maoism, rather than being the pattern for Asia’s future, became an anachronism, and it was the mainland Chinese who in fact were decisively influenced by the prosperity and dynamism of their overseas co-ethnics - the ironic ultimate victory of Taiwan.”<sup>91</sup>

No matter what political regimes survived and persisted, it was no longer possible to conceive of a system that was actually an improvement on political and economic liberalism. Liberal democracy was:

“The only coherent political *aspiration* that spans different regions and cultures around the globe. In addition, liberal principles in economics – the ‘free market’ – have spread, and have succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity.” (emphasis added)<sup>92</sup>

This remained true even if new forms were found of obstructing this aspiration through the continuation of authoritarianism.

While Fukayama is often criticised due to the mistaken belief that he was arguing that different political forms would cease to exist (at least “mistaken” in the 1989 version), the emphasis here is on “political aspiration”. As we have seen, when the CCP talks about promoting democratisation, it means establishing what Pan Wei called “a consultative rule of law regime”<sup>93</sup> designed to make one-party rule more effective, more efficient and more legitimate. And this idea of benign, consultative, “clean”, strong state, developmentalist, one-party rule has purchase outside of the party-state itself. It echoes the aspirations of some critical

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Fukayama, Francis., *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, Penguin, p.xiii.

<sup>93</sup> Pan Wei, “Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China”, in Zhao (ed.) *Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law Vs. Democratization*, pp.3-40.

intellectuals – not just those academics and thinkers who are close to the political system - and as far as it is possible to tell, it has wider appeal amongst the general populace.

Moreover, it is not necessarily the case that “consultative authoritarianism” is the aspiration; it is more of an interim aspiration - a means to other ends. The real political aspiration is what I have referred to in this paper as “the national project” – restoring China to a perceived rightful position in the global order. The aspiration is for the emergence of indigenous forms of governance based on China’s unique circumstances that guarantee Chinese independence and facilitate national regeneration and resurgence. Of course, these ideas are not universally held, and the political system itself has done much to construct the way in which this aspiration has been developed. But at the very least, we can say that the primacy of liberal democracy is challenged in contemporary China, and China’s resurgence is resulting in the questioning of the Western model in other parts of the world.

## Democratisation with Chinese characteristics: tensions and trends

The question is, is the move towards consultative authoritarianism sustainable, or does it contain inherent contradictions that will lead to it unravelling? As already argued in this paper, there are strong contrary arguments to the expectation that the emergence of a middle class will result in a challenge to one-party rule. Nonetheless, there are three issues that warrant attention here (and reflect the challenges the Chinese leadership has identified as well).

Firstly, despite massive growth, millions of Chinese remain in poverty, and many millions more are concerned that they will be unable to pay for decent education for their children, for health care when the need arises, or for a decent standard of living in old age. It is perhaps here, among those who feel that the system is not working for them, that the most potent

challenge to Party rule lies. Moreover, as Chen An puts it:

“From the populace’s viewpoint the widening income gap among social classes has resulted less from market mechanisms and more from the two related factors, namely political corruption and the prevalence of business cheating. Economic ‘upstarts’ have acquired their wealth through collusion with corrupt bureaucratic power or have taken advantage of market chaos to practice illegal or immoral businesses with impunity.”<sup>94</sup>

The recognition within the leadership of this potential challenge inspired the post-2004 emphasis on political reform, but although the system has taken action, it has far from neutralised the potential for social instability arising from amongst the relatively deprived.

This brings us to the second issue: the ability to deliver on promises. In economic terms, the much-vaunted move to a new economic paradigm based on development and equity rather than just growth has had some concrete results, but the task of satisfying the demands of those who feel unfairly left behind is simply too big to be accomplished any time soon. Politically, if those who respond to the new consultative climate and participate as required are periodically victims of bouts of policy tightening, as some seem to have been in the run-up to the Olympics, then the desire to participate is likely to decline and the belief that the system can live up to its promises might diminish.

Furthermore, as we have seen, one of the key objectives of democratisation with Chinese characteristics is to make the local state subject to the oversight of the people in accordance with central government aims and objectives. But unless central organisations dispatch inspection teams to stand over the shoulder of every local official, ensuring that local authorities do what they are meant to do remains hugely problematic.

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<sup>94</sup> Chen An, “Rising Class Politics and its Impact on China’s Path to Democracy”, p.148.

This is particularly so when the task of implementing democratisation is largely in the hands of those who might come under unwelcome scrutiny if they do a good job of making the new transparent system work.

Thirdly, we return to the aforementioned tension between encouraging debate and participation on one hand, and the desire to manage it on the other. To work properly, the “new” approach needs the state to not only tolerate but embrace and even promote non-state action. In a major report that has become known in English as *Storming the Fortress*, the Central Party School has promoted a “comprehensive political system reform plan” to be undertaken by 2020.<sup>95</sup> This not only echoes Hu Jintao’s own words in calling for “fundamental authority” to be restored to the people, but also for the growth of tolerance of different ideas and opinions - not just tolerance of social groups, but even of religious alternatives - to show the Party as a listening and all-embracing benign authority.

If this is going to work, NGOs need to emerge and develop to articulate the interests that elites know they need to take into account in developing policy. To an extent, this has happened – the growth of environmental NGOs is a good case in point here. Like the top Party leadership, these NGOs are often concerned with the way that local officials have prevented the implementation of central policy and law, and as such, their complaints are tolerated by the central state as they have the same targets in their sights. Rather than being in opposition to the Party, many environmental NGOs share the aims and objectives of the central Party leadership, providing a form of surveillance on environmental issues that local governments cannot be relied upon to provide. In this respect, environmental NGOs are filling a political space at the local level in alliance with the central leadership to act as a check and balance on the power

<sup>95</sup> Zhou Tianyong, Wang Changjiang, and Wang Anling, (eds.), “攻坚：十七大后中国政治体制改革研究报告” Gongjian: Shiqi Da Hou Zhongguo Zhengzhi Tizhi Gaige Yanjiu Baogao” (“Storming the Fortress: A research report on China’s political system reform, after the 17th Party Congress”), Beijing, Central Party School Press, 2007.

of local governments that not only regulate the local economy (and often own it in one way or another) but also exercise effective control over local environmental planning bureaux.

However, when push comes to shove, the system – whatever level of the system we are talking about – is ultimately wary in the extreme of allowing (let alone facilitating) truly independent participation in the political arena. Or more correctly, it is wary of what appears to be concerted and organised political participation. So as soon as political action appears to be organised and organised independently from the state, then the state gets nervous. For example, Shai notes that while the appeals system is not only facilitated but even encouraged in China, there is concern when individual appeals become collective appeals (which are still allowed and encouraged to an extent) and even more so when these collective cases appear to represent a coordinated public movement.<sup>96</sup> Concern with the emergence of truly independent action probably explains why the Party reacted in the way it did to the emergence of the *falungon* 法轮功. And we have already pointed to the way that the initial open response to the Sichuan earthquake gave way to a more cautious and defensive position. Highlighting problems and opposing specific policies is one thing – but doing so in a coordinated and uncontrollable manner is something else entirely, even if it is not a direct attack on Party rule. And in many respects, the way that the leadership responds to this contradiction – the desire to consult versus the desire to control – will go a long way to determining how the democratisation process works out in the future.

Add these challenges together, and there is a distinct possibility that the drive for democratisation might backfire. The Weng’an riots of June 2008 are of particular note here. Thousands of residents rioted and set fire to government buildings over the perceived cover up of the murder of a local girl by the children of

<sup>96</sup> Collective appeals are meant to be for no more than five appellants, meaning that larger scale collective action is, strictly speaking, beyond the legal limit. Shai argues that bigger appeals are allowed unless they look like a coordinated and coherent political movement. Shai, “Managed Participation in China”.

a local public security official. Hundreds were arrested in the aftermath, and the government ordered a nationwide “Olympic Stability Campaign”. Although there was a specific spark that generated the riot in this case, Weng’an is in one of China’s poorest provinces (Guizhou) and in an area where there have been a number of industrial accidents which had not led to criminal charges. Here was a case that shows the fragility of the social order in some places, the importance of local power holders as enforcers (or not) of new political initiatives, and the extent of the central government’s concern that social dissatisfaction might not only cause instability but also national embarrassment.<sup>97</sup> While the causes of the riots suggest that the new democratising polity had not filtered down to Weng’an, the response to the riots also perhaps shows the limits of the new consultative polity and that the desire for stability ultimately trumps inclinations to expand consultation and transparency.

## Democratisation with Chinese characteristics: the implications for Europe

The emphasis on the importance of a distinctly Chinese model of democratisation has important implications for European democracy promotion efforts – be they proposed by the EU or by individual European states. It is not just that foreign models are seen as being built on the different experiences of different societies at different times and therefore not transferable and applicable to the current Chinese setting. The West is not just being arrogant and misguided by trying to impose its model on the rest of the world, but there is a strong feeling supported by official discourses that this is part of a concerted Western effort to, at best, contain China and prevent its re-emergence as a global power.

Every Chinese child learns from an early age that China’s modern history started with the arrival of the British in the 19th century, and the Western imposition

of economic and political “norms” that resulted in a century of shame, humiliation, chaos and collapse. Proponents of democracy promotion today might not think that they have anything in common with the proponents of the opium trade in the 1830s, but it is an association that is not uncommon within China. To be sure, it might be an extreme view, but even proponents of democratisation in China are extremely wary of being told what to do from the outside and of the efficacy of implanting external political models onto China. With the Party firmly established as the only force that can protect China from the predatory interests of the West, the external promotion of democratic change can be and is used as an example of just such predatory action. The Party is thus able to prove its nationalist credentials and satisfy its (partially self-created) domestic nationalist constituency. As such, democracy promotion can ironically lead to the strengthening of support for the authoritarian political system, rather than weakening one-party rule.

However, this doesn’t mean that there is no role for international actors in China’s democratisation process. Indeed, the Chinese authorities have actually sought international help to develop legal institutions, to train judges and other officials and establish effective local election processes, and European actors have been well represented in all of these areas.<sup>98</sup> Grand theories of Western democratisation might be resisted, but external help in institution and capacity building is a different story. However, even here, the implications are not always clear cut. For example, in helping develop democratic institutions, Balducci argues that Europeans have largely accepted relatively close scrutiny from the Public Security Bureau and restrictions on which civil society groups can be involved in promoting democratic governance.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, in providing aid to promote the rule of law

<sup>98</sup> As just one example, my colleague at Warwick University, Professor Alan Neal, led a joint project between the Chinese Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the UK Foreign Office to establish the Chinese Labour Administration Court, and has subsequently advised the Chinese government on labour contract law and labour dispute mechanisms. See: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/staff/academic/Neal/>

<sup>99</sup> Giuseppe Balducci’s PhD thesis on the European promotion of Human Rights in China will be submitted at the University of Warwick in late summer 2008.

<sup>97</sup> “Stability Drive Launched After Riot”, *South China Morning Post*, 30 June 2008.

and Chinese-style democratisation, donors and activists need to be aware of one of the key arguments proposed in this paper - in the Chinese leadership's eyes, this is part of the strategy of strengthening single party rule. So once again, we have a situation where (if it works as the Chinese want it to) even this lower level democracy promotion might result in the strengthening of authoritarian rule rather than its destabilisation.

Of course, it might not work as the Chinese want it to, and the creation of institutions might spill over into wider political reform. It is for this reason that many individuals and institutions continue to work in and with China. However, if we put the long-term aside for

the time being, perhaps a key requirement for Europe here, in terms of promoting democratic change in China, is thinking realistically about expectations. For example, the establishment of institutions that give Chinese workers more ability to claim their legally established rights is something that is not only attainable, but also something that the Chinese government wants to attain. Being constrained by Chinese government priorities and definitions of what is acceptable might not be wholly palatable. Neither is the idea that this might actually result in the consolidation of one-party rule. But it might be what is possible in terms of really improving the lives of real people on the ground.

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A more consultative form of politics is emerging in China. Questioning the one-party state is still not deemed legitimate and the demand for democratic change is hard to gauge. The driving force behind the ushering in of a more open form of politics is the Chinese Communist Party's 'National Project'. This paper examines the complex relations between nationalism, economic development and political change in China and assesses the prospects for longer-term democratisation - along with the policy implications for Western governments.

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