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Political Reform and Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China

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Summary
While China's economic and social reforms have gained much attention internationally, the CCP regime's efforts at political structural reform (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*) initiated by Deng Xiaoping have been widely ignored by China scholars so far. Political reforms that do not aim at abolishing one-party rule to the benefit of some form of Western liberal (multi-party) democracy are not taken seriously by most observers of China's modernisation process. This article hypothesizes that these reforms do actually affect regime legitimacy in a positive way and should therefore be carefully analysed in order to explain the "authoritarian resilience" of Communist one-party rule. It is argued that political reform in its limited sense of enhancing cadre efficiency and accountability (instead of empowering the *demos* vis-à-vis the state) may, indeed, help to effectively prolong one-party rule in contemporary China.

I. Introduction: A legitimacy crisis?

China has been experiencing a dynamic process of economic reform and social modernisation for more than 25 years now. For those who follow the country's transformation as attentively as China scholars do, this process is primarily associated with China's market transformation. The country seems to confirm at least one part of Fukuyama's "end of history," i.e. the eventual rise of market economies all over the world after the end of the Cold War and the downfall of Soviet socialism (Fukuyama 1992). Still, China's economic trajectory since the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s, and especially its reform path since the early 1990s, has been profoundly different from developments in Central Europe and in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, including Russia. Three specific features of the Chinese market transformation immediately come to mind, as Andrew Walder (2004: 190-192) has recently pointed out again:

1. The Communist Party survived the critical period after 1989 and has been revitalised since then instead of tumbling into decay. Unlike so many other post-Communist regimes, its elites have not been forced from power; on the

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contrary, it seems they have been able to consolidate their rule over the last decade.

2. China's market reforms have fared much better than those undertaken in Central Europe and Russia in terms of the absolute economic growth they have unleashed.[1] The abrupt collapse of political institutions and the sudden demise of the entire system of economic regulation and property rights were markers of the development in the former Soviet bloc, causing economic damage from which these countries – especially Russia – would suffer for years to come. China, in contrast, engaged in much more gradual economic reform while clinging to its political framework of Communist one-party rule.
3. The privatisation of state assets has been much slower and more cautious in China than elsewhere in the post-Communist world, where most of the state assets were transferred to private markets in the first years of the transition. Most strikingly, China's private sector has not risen through the transfer of state assets to private owners, but mainly by way of private entrepreneurship starting outside the state sector and through foreign investment. Consequently, although being quite large already and contributing to some 55-60 per cent of GDP, China's private sector clearly lags behind most post-Communist economies.[2]

As a matter of fact, one is tempted to call China's reform path unique. Here is a Communist leadership that is successfully controlling the speed and scope of market reform implementation, with Party elites turning into a new capitalist oligarchy at a much lower rate than elsewhere; a leadership that maintains political supremacy during this process; and a leadership that seems to maintain a critical level of stability and presumably generate sufficient regime legitimacy at the same time, apparently by good economic performance, nationalistic zeal and a good deal of tolerance with respect to political decentralisation and local voice. However, at this point most Western observers make their *caveat*: the Communist Party may well have been successful so far in perpetuating its exclusive power, but with every day that passes, it nevertheless comes closer to the unavoidable intersection of full-scale privatisation and democratisation. For these observers, three scenarios are imaginable for China in the near future. The "apocalyptic" variant predicts that the current degrees of social and political instability will lead to intra-Party friction and ultimate regime collapse. The "optimistic" variant speculates on a gradual transition to a democratic system along the model set out by South Korea and Taiwan. Some scholars add a third variant often branded "muddling through," i.e. the perpetuation of the current way of problem-solving which is reactive in nature and limited to the objective of

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1 Whereas Poland – the most successful post-Communist country – saw economic growth of 44 per cent between 1991 and 2001, China's economy almost grew threefold during the same period. See Walder 2004: 190.

2 Walder added a fourth point, i.e. "the unprecedented expansion in college-level education that is rapidly transforming (China's) urban elites" (ibid: 191).

preserving Communist one-party rule. However, in this scenario the demise of Communist rule is only slowed down; it cannot be rescued from eventual collapse or, in the best case, self-initiated democratic transformation. All in all, system change (*Systemwechsel*) is regarded as being inevitable in China, be it revolutionary or reformist in nature.[3] Even if the current regime may not be considered instable yet, but in a state of "stable unrest that may continue for some time" (see preface in Shambaugh 2000), in the West it certainly counts as deeply delegitimised in the eyes of most of the people it claims to represent. With stability precarious at best, it is assumed, the Communist regime faces a deep-going crisis of legitimacy that will ultimately lead to democratisation.

The challenges lying ahead for China are certainly manifold. But they all seem to boil down to the broadly perceived contradiction between steady market transformation on the one hand and persistent authoritarianism on the other. Modernisation theory postulates that a political regime must open up in the long run in order to master the rising complexities of economic and social development by establishing responsive political institutions, feedback channels of communication between the state and its citizens, and inclusive modes of participation. At a minimum, a non-democratic state must foster continued and equitable economic growth by ensuring sufficient degrees of (extractive, regulative and redistributive) state capacity; and liberalise the political system for the institutionalisation of at least some participation considered meaningful by the people (Dittmer 2003a: 904). The core problem for the Chinese Communist Party since the beginning of the reform era has always been how to achieve these goals without endangering one-party rule.

For most Western Scholars, this problem is unsolvable. China is destined to become democratic, as it is perceived as being deeply affected by discontentment among the people caused by unbalanced economic growth, flagrant cadre corruption and aggravating social cleavages. Serious protest and upheaval in the countryside and the ailing industrial centres, the formation of underground resistance by clandestine religious groups and the (alleged) estrangement of a growing middle class from Communist ideology and the Party's power monopoly. In addition to these points, there are the tensions that exist between the central and the local state, which are set against a backdrop of legal fuzziness, fiscal competition, illegal rent-seeking and insufficient financial resources for many local governments. These are just some of the points made to illustrate the declining capacity of the state in contemporary China. According to certain predictions, the decline will eventually result in a fade-out of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Of course, no serious scholar can say when this will exactly happen.

[3] For recent Western publications discussing China's democratic future which present these different viewpoints see Zhao 2000a, 2000b; Friedman/McCormick 2000; Ding 2002; Zheng 2004, Gilley 2004a.

For the time being, however, the Communist Party is holding out. There is no political movement or organisation in sight which could effectively challenge it at this point. But why is the current regime so successful in sustaining one-party rule? China's economic modernisation and the economic benefits that it generates for the overall majority of the people – at least in absolute terms – must certainly be pointed out as one reason for the CCP's continuous political dominance. Moreover, it is often held that Chinese nationalism has successfully filled the ideological vacuum of the post-Mao era and weakened the claims to democratisation. What are usually (and frequently enough intentionally) ignored in this context are the *non-economic* reforms introduced in China since 1989 (and even earlier, in fact), which the Chinese government calls "political structural reforms" (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*). Often enough, these measures are discredited as pure window-dressing targeted at the perpetuation of authoritarian one-party rule; or they are conceived of as half-hearted or futile efforts on the part of an ailing regime to maintain stability and legitimacy. Only Chinese *legal* reform has earned some appreciation in the West, but not without the qualification that its sustainability and further entrenchment depends on genuine political reform, i.e. the introduction of multi-party democracy as the most important precondition of the rule of law.[4] China's so-called political reforms are thus considered as inevitable adaptations to the logic of economic and social modernisation which help the Communist Party to win time, but cannot secure it any more legitimacy or even turn the wheel of Fukuyaman history.

Unfortunately, sound knowledge of the effects that these reforms trigger in terms of institutional change and, consequently, regime legitimacy lags far behind our understanding of China's market transformation. Western studies focusing on Chinese political reforms and their consequences for state capacity and regime legitimacy are scant if not completely absent.[5] However, given the continuity of one-party rule under the conditions of a near-capitalist system, it could be a stimulating hypothesis to claim that the Communist leadership's "authoritarian resilience" (Nathan 2003) is at least partly linked to China's political reforms, by which the regime has been able to generate critical degrees of stability and legitimacy to secure its survival. The current regime's legitimacy wouldn't be exclusively based on "truth, benevolence and glory" then, as Vivienne Shue (2004) put it recently,[6] but also on accountability

[4] For recent Western studies on the progress and limitations of China's legal reform, see Turner 2000; Potter 2003; Peerenboom 2005.

[5] Although Chinese political reforms have been partly discussed in the context of the overall reform process by many scholars, to our knowledge there is so far only one Western monograph that systematically deals with the CCP's agenda of political structural reform (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*) in the post-Mao era (Wong 2005). For the Chinese debate on political reforms, see chapters III and IV.

[6] For Shue, regime legitimacy in China is mainly based on the Communist Party's claimed "possession of a special knowledge of transcendent truth, benevolent care for the common people, and the conscious glorification of the Chinese nation" (2004: 33). Whatever effort to contest this legitimacy is undertaken, it must challenge the CCP on those issues. Consequently, as Shue argues, the official attack on the Falungong movement is fully understandable, because it contests the CCP's most power-

achieved by new modes of political participation and, *eo ipso*, public control. Hence, whilst the Chinese people do not enjoy the same freedoms and rights that exist in Western political systems and societies, they may be quite content with one-party rule because of the CCP's positive economic performance, its serious efforts to achieve internal and external stability, its self-confident claim to be recognised as a Great Power, and finally its cautious attempts to reconfigure the relations between state and society by meaningful – albeit limited – democratic practice. To put it differently, as long as the CCP manages to convince the people that it can effectively provide stability and prosperity, and that it intends to make its authority fair and just by strengthening the rule of law and by implementing more political participation (albeit without effectively challenging Communist supremacy), it does not have to face any serious challenges. Of course, this does not mean that some form of (Western) liberal democracy cannot be implemented in present-day China. However, it may be that for historical, social and cultural reasons, the Communist Party has more leeway than other non-democratic regimes to consolidate its power monopoly in the long term if only the central requests of the people to guarantee stability, economic development and cadre accountability – not multi-party democracy – are met.

These assumptions are certainly controversial. But although China's present-day problems often evoke the image of an authoritarian government struggling for survival, a closer look at the effects of political structural reform since the Tiananmen tragedy might indeed suggest that Communist one-party rule is more stable and actually enjoys more legitimacy now than at any other time since the early 1990s. Such a look might also conclude that the CCP will be able to do much better in the coming future than only being forced to "muddle through," thereby questioning the predictions made by those pundits who stick to their scenarios of imminent system change in China either due to implosion or transformation. On the contrary, one-party rule in China could be maintained for a long time to come – not just because the Communist Party successfully suppresses dissent and the rise of any political alternative, reaps the harvest of continuous economic growth and pulls the strings of nationalism aptly, but also because it makes the people believe it's serious in pushing forward the rule of law, "cleaning up" and professionalising the cadre system, enhancing public control over the government bureaucracy, strengthening the people's congress system, broadening political participation at the local level and – most notably – providing for social stability. "Benevolence, glory, stability and

ful truths – the truth of a socialist market economy as the path to stability, prosperity and national greatness, and the truth of rationality and modern science as the modes of progress and individual happiness. As for the Chinese people, Shue identified a "state of acute ambivalence" concerning their feelings and convictions to be governed by a legitimate regime and not an outright legitimacy crisis. The key to understanding this ambivalence is the people's robust preference of stability over the uncertainties of leaving the "known world of Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Wasserstrom 2004: 30)

accountability" might thus be the formula ensuring continuous one-party rule in China, with accountability directly connected to the successful implementation of political reforms *à la Chinoise*.

II. Understanding Chinese political reform from a Western perspective

The official discourse on political structural reform (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*)[7] is different from the intellectual one, as it clearly pursues an instrumental agenda in order to ensure the consolidation of Communist rule over a rapidly changing Chinese society. The content of this agenda once spelled out most comprehensively by Zhao Ziyang in his political report to the Thirteenth CCP Congress in 1987 has not changed very much since then: separating the Party from the government; delegating central state power to lower administrative levels; streamlining the government bureaucracy; professionalising the cadre system; establishing new feedback mechanisms between the Party and the people; strengthening the monitoring and law-making functions of the People's Congress system and the mass organisations; and implementing a socialist rule-of-law system (Wong 2005: 10). This programme has recently been revised and was set down in a government white paper on the building of political democracy in China released in October 2005 (PRC State Council 2005).[8] This document aims at bringing about "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics," the core concept of a remoulded political system of one-party rule that is considered modern and legitimate by the Chinese people. Could such an approach to political reform be viable? How do we have to make sense of it when going beyond the verdict that *zhengzhi tizhi gaige* is nothing more than an apologetic attempt by the CCP to stay in power?

Lowell Dittmer explained and systematised the Communist leadership's understanding of political reform by arguing from the outset that this understanding is "neither clear nor unified" (2003b: 348). He distinguished between three reform visions of the CCP regime that inform its thinking: (1) *economic developmentalism*, i.e. the vision of reform as the functional outcome of economic modernisation; (2) *institutionalised personalism*, i.e. the vision of reform as the establishment of rules

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7 The term *zhengzhi tizhi gaige* was first used by Deng Xiaoping in 1986.

8 This extensive 70-page document spells out the official concept of "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics." While using very orthodox language to underline the CCP's guidance of the process, it names the development of the People's Congress System, co-operation with the so-called democratic parties, ethnic regional autonomy, grass-roots democracy in urban and rural areas, and respecting and safeguarding human rights as the cornerstones of "building political democracy in China." Moreover, the white paper focuses on pushing forward democratic one-party rule by institutionalising intra-party democracy, introducing new modes of selection and competition to the recruitment of cadres, and implementing the civil service system which was put on legal ground by the NPC Standing Committee in April 2005. Different measures to enhance good governance by making government more law-abiding, transparent and service-orientated are also enumerated as steps by which to build "socialist democracy."

and ritualised procedures in the realm of informal politics; and (3) "percolation," i.e. the vision of reform as ideas and practices rising from the grass roots to the top, where they are adopted by the central government and aggregated into nation-wide measures of political reform.

To be more specific, *economic developmentalism* is understood by the Communist leadership as organisational pragmatism: whatever must be done in the political system to ensure smooth economic development will be done. This was the reason why in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping urged his comrades to implement the functional separation of the Party and the government (*dangzheng fenkai*) and to shield SOE administration from the influence of local governments (*zhengqi fenkai*). Economic developmentalism stood behind China's early civil service reform project launched by the late Zhao Ziyang in 1987, which aimed at reducing the CCP's control over personnel matters and distinguished between political cadres subject to the *nomenclatura* system on the one hand and government cadres under the supervision of the Ministry of Personnel, administered by codified recruitment and evaluation procedures on the other. The decentralisation of power initiated by Deng, which gave more political autonomy to the provinces before undertaking China's most comprehensive fiscal reform to the very day in 1993/94, was also motivated by economic developmentalism. All these reform projects were taken over by Jiang Zemin, who made a special effort at streamlining the government bureaucracy and enhancing administrative efficiency. Under Jiang, many of the former decentralisation policies were curtailed for reasons of apparent inefficiency – and because of Jiang's initial pressure to strengthen his control over the Party when he became its Secretary-General in 1989. However, he was the one who pushed through the official acceptance of private entrepreneurs as regular Party members in 2001, thereby seriously knocking the CCP's proletarian-peasant tradition and class-struggle ideology. Professionalisation, efficiency, ideological adjustment and the co-optation of the most modern segments of Chinese society into the Party are all considered political reforms in the context of economic developmentalism, and as such they are understood as creating new bonds between the people and the Party-state that strengthen the latter's legitimacy.

Institutionalised personalism refers to a non-articulated consensus within the Communist leadership that informal personalism should gradually be replaced by structures and, eventually, by "constitutional sanctification" (Dittmer 2003b: 358). It has been repeatedly noted that factionalism and succession politics at the top tier of the Party have changed and become more ritualised in recent years (Dittmer 2003c; Lin 2004). Today, factionalism is mainly restricted to important personnel issues. This means that it has been scaled back in the everyday process of political decision-making and only becomes visible when the Party and government leadership is re-elected. But even then, formal rules matter (e.g. the legal limitation of all government positions to two five-year terms), while informal rules have gained momentum (e.g. the 70-year age limit for all top Party posts including seats in the Standing

Committee of the Politbureau and the 65-year age limit for members of the Central Committee).[9]

The Chinese understanding of political reform as the legalisation of successful local practice is most interesting. A prominent example of this "percolation model" is the institutionalisation of the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s, which contracted agricultural production to private households and led to the development of large produce markets and township and village enterprises later on. The incorporation of villager self-government into the new 1982 state constitution followed a controversial debate in the Communist leadership on the implications of a couple of non-authorised experiments already underway in two counties in Guangxi province shortly after the breakdown of the People's Commune system (O'Brien & Li 2000: 465). Other examples are measures like those adopted in Hainan concerning administrative restructuring and the introduction of new, economically self-responsible government units ("small government, big society") (Feng 2001) or more recent experiments with new procedures to select local government cadres in Chinese townships, although these have not been legalised at the national level yet (Saich & Yang 2003; Schubert 2003).

However, percolation may also take place in the opposite direction, i.e. from the upper to the lower levels in the Chinese political system. In these cases, the central government introduces a reform measure on an experimental basis in certain selected localities or on a voluntary basis for any locality that wants to implement the corresponding measure, before fully institutionalising it at the national level. Once again, the experimental Organic Law on Villager Committees adopted in 1987 serves as a good example. After observing and assessing the implementation process for a decade, a revised Organic Law was finally promulgated in 1998, making direct village elections legally binding in the whole country. It becomes clear that political reform in this context is a tentative innovation that must be checked against Chinese realities and not against a blueprint of "perfect democracy"; it must prove its specific benefit, serving society's (and the Party's) needs before it is generalised by legal codification. There is a certain danger for the regime implicated in the "percolation model," as initiatives from the bottom might be difficult to contain or control in times of economic or social distress. People learn to make strategic use of newly obtained rights to exert pressure on the Party and the government. For instance, the right to vote and the right to complain to higher levels (*shangfang*) may trigger off widespread upheaval if local cadres violate the laws.[10] Any bottom-up approach to

[9] These informal age limits were set up during the 15th CCP Congress in 1997 (see Baum 2000). The decision to keep 71-year old Jiang Zemin in office as general secretary in order to secure a sound transition from the third to the fourth leadership generation, however, confirms the ongoing significance of "mentor politics" at the top of the Party (Wu 2004).

[10] The concept of *rightful resistance* has become most prominent to explain the consequences of political reforms that give the people legal rights to be used against corrupt and arbitrary cadre behaviour (see O'Brien & Li forthcoming).

political reform is dangerous for a one-party system, so the Communist Party treats it most cautiously.

The official understanding of political reform in China (see below for details) does not correspond to the Western understanding of the term as an incremental redistribution of power to the benefit of those groups within society that have been powerless so far and now enjoy meaningful participation. However, the introduction of procedures and institutions for the sake of enhancing efficiency and reassuring control while generating only low levels of accountability cannot be called *genuine* political reform by Western standards (see the papers contributed by Bernstein and Cabestan in this volume). A few objections can be made here, though: 1. Even if administrative efficiency and social control are at the heart of China's approach to political reform, the new modes of accountability that have been introduced to the system at different levels cannot be underestimated and should be properly investigated with a view to their impact on the future dynamics of Chinese politics. 2. Even if economic developmentalism, institutionalised personalism and "percolation" do not challenge one-party rule directly, they could still contribute to a gradual horizontalisation of power within the Chinese political system and society at large. 3. It is better to measure the CCP's concept of political reform against its own pretensions in order to assess its relevancy for regime legitimacy than to immediately exclude *zhengzhi tizhi gaige* as a possible explanatory factor of the regime's authoritarian resilience.[11] By taking this direction, we might come closer to an adequate understanding of the current system's stability and legitimacy than by judging *zhengzhi tizhi gaige* against the Western blueprint of liberal democracy. Such an approach also supports the above-mentioned "legitimacy hypothesis" now assembled somewhat differently: political reform under Communist one-party rule is meaningful, as it enhances the regime's legitimacy by providing substantial accountability for state organs and the cadre bureaucracy. This is primarily achieved by strengthening the rule of law, broadening political participation (at the local level) and making government more professional, transparent and accountable.

III. The Chinese Discourse on Political Reform

The discourse on political reforms among China's intellectuals has gained new momentum since the mid-1990s. Not surprisingly, only a small minority of marginalised academics have spoken out about democratic regime change through the introduction of a multi-party system. The majority of intellectuals discuss politi-

[11] Interestingly, a recent study by Tang Wenfang (2005: 70-76) has shown that urban Chinese favour their own country as the best model for future political reform in China. Tang concluded from his various empirical findings that the Chinese government "enjoys a considerable amount of legitimacy and support," while "urban residents seemed to have become more politically conservative and anti-change." This corresponds with a survey conducted in May 2005 in some major Chinese cities, which found that 72 per cent of the respondents were satisfied with national conditions (*International Herald Tribune*, 15 November 2005).

cal reform within the framework of one-party rule.[12] This debate shows that no unitary concept of political reform exists; instead, we find a broad range of diverging opinions. However, in recent years, three basic approaches to the understanding of political reform in contemporary China have come to the fore. According to the first one, there is no fundamental contradiction between the political, economic and intellectual elites of the country concerning the basic objectives of political reform. It argues that the economic elites (primarily entrepreneurs and managers) are interested in smooth business operations and profits. This group supports political reform in terms of more transparency, legal security, stronger checks and balances in order to curb corruption, and more economic and social participation. This does not mean that it subscribes to democracy in a "Western" sense, however. Political legitimacy is essentially derived from economic development. As regards the intellectuals, the negative impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US "anti-China policy" and the inclusion of intellectuals in the process of political decision-making have all gradually changed their views on the Party-state to a more positive stance. People in general are increasingly dissatisfied with corruption, unemployment and growing social inequality. Yet, as the argument proceeds, this has not resulted in the emergence of an elite-driven opposition movement, since the majority of China's intellectuals are rather conservative and Party-orientated. Although corruption is a destabilising factor demanding strict countermeasures, fighting corruption too resolutely could damage the current alliances among the political elites, especially at the middle and lower cadre levels. Hence, political reform must take the contingencies of overall regime stability adequately into account. The protagonists of the first approach contend that the current political system possesses substantial legitimacy and trust and is widely accepted within society. The primary concern of the people is that the political leadership solves the immediate problems of their daily lives. Political reform, therefore, should be issue-orientated and incremental, whereas democracy is an objective to be achieved some day in the future.[13]

The second approach, in contrast, is in favour of immediate political reforms to avoid the danger of economic stagnation and combat corruption detrimental to regime legitimacy. There are six viewpoints within this approach concerning the objectives of political reform: (a) *maintaining political stability* through more democratic rights, and the restriction of the power of the state;[14] (b) *promoting economic development*, especially by the professionalisation of cadres and more transparency in the political decision-making process; c) *implementing the rule of*

[12] See Huang 1998; Zhang 2001; Wang 2003; Xie 2003; Xu 2003; He 2004 and Derichs, Heberer & Sausmikat 2004.

[13] Kang 2002: 1-15.

[14] Once again, this does not imply a "Western" liberal democratic multi-party system, but rather rule of law, enhanced participation, civic rights and the existence of certain checks and balances within the current system of one-party rule, i.e. "socialist democracy" as a combination of single-party rule and certain democratic institutions.

law as a precondition of "socialist democracy" as characterised above; d) *making the political system more efficient*; e) *reducing overcentralisation*; f) *pursuing political democratisation* as a long-term ultimate goal. In order to achieve these aims, one has to differentiate between the short-term and long-term objectives of political reform. The former intend to make the state more effective and limit state power. The latter are supposed to put political democratisation in order to achieve regime stability and new legitimacy for one-party rule.[15]

The third approach argues that the implementation of a fully-fledged market economy is the basic precondition of modern democracy. As long as this stage has not been reached yet, a first practical step towards more political democracy in China, so the argument goes, would be to make intra-Party decisions more open, transparent and democratic. This can be achieved most effectively by elections of Party officials and leading Party bodies at all echelons, and by enhancing the leverage of the lower levels of Party organisations upon the higher ones. Thereafter, and in accordance with economic development, a more democratic system outside the Party could be established, starting by strengthening the National People's Congress, establishing an independent legal system, giving more freedom to the press, and institutionalising more mechanisms of public control.[16]

Overall, China's intellectuals are proponents of incremental democratisation, i.e. by gradually implementing democratic procedures and institutions, permitting the foundation of social organisations and NGOs, and guaranteeing legal accountability.[17] In this context, they even refer to Adam Przeworski's theory of *minimal democracy*, i.e. the gradual enhancement of both participation and political transparency without impairing political stability.[18]

The above-mentioned concepts do not differ too much from the debate on political reform that takes place within the Party. The political leadership agrees that the objective of political reform is "democracy" in the sense of rule of law, a high degree of participation and sound institutional checks and balances. As a first step towards such a democracy, political reform (in the sense of *zhengzhi tizhi gaige*) is supposed to establish *accountability*, *transparency*, *reliability* and *trust* among the people. However, this should by no means hamper political, social and economic stability. Currently, the dominant official view is that China should focus on improving the existing system prior to democratisation, gradually enhancing participation and the prosperity of its entire people and creating a Chinese-style "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*).[19] The concept of a "harmonious society" was first put forward at the 4th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CCP in

15 Huang 2002: 72-82.
16 Huang 2002: 21-30.
17 Yu 2000.
18 See e.g. Wu 2000.
19 See the Government white paper on democracy building cited above (FN 8).

September 2004. In his report to the National People's Congress in February 2005, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao explained that democracy, the rule of law, justice, sincerity and a solid social balance are features of a "harmonious society." The main challenge for such a society is to tackle social contradictions and cleavages in a way that creates stability and trust between the government and the people. These objectives are supposed to be achieved by creating a solid material base for the country, through economic and social justice within society, through a well-functioning legal system and through a continuous increase in the educational level of all of China's citizens.[20] Party leader Hu Jintao further argued in June 2005 that a "harmonious society" encompasses the construction of "ideology and morality" (*sixiang daode*), a correct treatment of the contradictions within the people, reinforcing the ecological and environmental build-up, good governance und social stability.[21]

A "harmonious society" is, in fact, a contemporary revival of the traditional Confucian ideal of the "Great Harmony" (*datong*), i.e. a society characterised by social equality and political harmony as opposed to the dangers of a neo-liberal market society characterised by consumerism, material wealth and the maximisation of profit. As sociologist Hang Lin has accentuated, this concept intends to increase the number of people belonging to the middle strata, to reduce the number of poor people and those with a low income, and to combat corruption.[22] The "old" and abstract goal of "Communism" is thus replaced by a social ideal that seems to be a not too distant perspective. In a "harmonious" society everybody leads a contented life. Although social contradictions still exist, they can be resolved peacefully; the people can "feel" the harmonious society (in contrast to the ideal of a Communist society).[23]

Interestingly, the above-mentioned approaches to political reform (and democracy) are primarily concerned with the interests of urban citizens and less with the rural population. However, unrest among peasants has been increasing tremendously in recent years due to corruption among village and township officials, arbitrary local taxes and fees levied on villagers, and land illegally confiscated from peasants by local officials. Social scientist Yu Jianrong argues that the resistance of peasants has changed in recent years: from spontaneous "routine resistance" prior to the 1990s to "lawful rebellion" until 1998 (i.e. quoting state policies or laws to resist political arbitrariness at the local level) and "actively using the law to fight" from then onwards. According to Yu, the latter is characterised by a fight for political rights and the enforcement of existing laws and regulations. It is primarily directed at local officials and not at the political system *per se*. Peasants establish trans-village

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20 Qiang Wei 2004 as well as various contributions to the Report of the Government to the National People's Congress in March 2005, *Renmin Ribao*, 7-9 March 2003.

21 *Renmin Ribao*, 27 June 2006.

22 Op. cit. Wang/Zhu 2004; see also *Renmin Ribao*, 9 March 2005.

23 Chen 2005; Ma/Pei 2005. The term "harmonious society" reminds one of the term "well-ordered society" introduced by John Rawls. Rawls thereby invokes the image of a society based on principles of justness and goals shared by all citizens (1993: 35-40).

communication networks and use demonstrations and sit-ins as a means to accomplish their goals. Paradoxically, their actions are "permitted by law" but "prohibited by politics." In future, this might evolve from "securing rights by law" to "political participation" by law.[24] Thus, the peasantry could become a strong motivational force calling for enhanced participation in China in the future (and even for "minimal democratisation" in the sense used by Przeworski). Even *Renmin Ribao* has recently argued that "peasants constitute the main force of reform."[25]

IV. An alternative research agenda for political reform in the PRC

In recent years many China scholars have pointed out that the Communist Party has been quite successful in adapting to the challenges of market transformation and socioeconomic modernisation by implementing legal, administrative, social and political reforms – all referred to as *zhengzhi tizhi gaige* from the Chinese perspective – that have ensured the survival of one-party rule. These scholars do not identify a decaying Party at this point, nor do they postulate that the current regime will soon be incapable of handling the complex problems arising from China's market transition. John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, for instance, have pointed out that it would be wrong to overestimate the negative impact of China's economic reforms on the Party-state's stability, as is constantly suggested in the Western media by its focus on the growing income disparities within society and between regions, social unrest caused by unemployment and labour migration, peasant resistance to local taxation, widespread corruption among cadres, etc.: "To a remarkable degree thus far, the beneficiaries and victims of the just-ending era of economic reform have synergistically formed a system of checks and balances. Weaknesses and opposition have been checked by countervailing strengths and opportunities" (Lewis/Litai 2003: 932). Jean-Pierre Cabestan, making sense of his analysis of China's more recent political reforms, asked if it was "not possible that China will once again innovate and manage its retreat from communism through a movement towards a softer but stabilised authoritarianism that is consultative yet also elitist and corporatist and equipped with a certain legal modernity but not with the rule of law and only partly institutionalised" (2004: 21). Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen found "formidable sources of regime legitimation to buttress the Party-state" in the face of various types of protest in contemporary China (2004: 16). Can one go even further and wonder if it was impossible under the condition of ongoing political reform under one-party rule for such "enlightened authoritarianism," as Cabestan has called it, to become legitimate and sustainable for quite some time to come? This does not mean that the Chinese people would not favour democracy over authoritarianism, but that they might favour one-party rule over multi-party rule as long as the Communist

[24] Yu Jianrong 2005.

[25] *Renmin Ribao*, 5 January 2006.

Party manages to convincingly redefine itself as just and accountable, especially at the all-important local level – besides claiming successfully to be the only viable force in China to guarantee social stability? The answer should not be based on belief, but on empirical observation and academic judgement.

Bruce Gilley, a keen observer of the Communist Party and contemporary Chinese politics, has dealt with the "legitimacy hypothesis" in a stimulating article which perfectly illustrates the difference between Western and Chinese perspectives on political reform and their consequences. Taking the assumption seriously that the current regime has become more stable due to limited political reform and more intra-Party competition in recent years, he identified declining degrees of contestation and participation within the Chinese leadership since Hu Jintao took over at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002. Hence, he proclaimed the "end of politics in Beijing" (Gilley 2004b). Ironically, Gilley found that the new centralisation of political decision-making at the top of the Party was the logical outcome of the CCP's efforts to strengthen regime legitimacy, as the Communist leaders have found it ever more necessary to establish a consensus for every important decision to be taken. They could not afford, as Gilley argued, to risk this consensus being derailed by expanding consultation and participation to broader circles within the Party. To put the author's point in a nutshell, the current top leadership is depoliticising the system in order to legitimise its power monopoly by more consensual politics, but in the long run this can only lead to systemic deficiencies and ultimately to regime failure.

One might argue with Gilley as to whether contestation and participation have really substantially declined at the top of the Party since the end of 2002; they have certainly not been extended. However, some more fundamental objections can also be raised. First of all, Gilley may have overestimated the significance of the rough-and-tumble at the Party's top level with regard to overall regime stability and legitimacy in the PRC, while ignoring the significance of local processes of contestation and participation. Secondly, political participation is too strictly measured in terms of formally institutionalised elections to be taken to the national level. This conception ignores the deepening of participation (and contestation) *at the same level*, which can be as important for regime legitimacy as the vertical extension of competitive elections. The extension of direct elections from the village to the township level, for instance, has not taken place in China yet and there is little indication that such a decision will be made by the central government in the near future. However, village elections can change cadre-peasant relations profoundly and bring about new modes of political bargaining and contractual thinking which come to benefit villagers' interests and the regime's quest for legitimacy (Brandtstädter & Schubert 2005).[26]

[26] This does not mean that village elections haven't failed to bring about this win-win result in many localities, but instead have further delegitimised the regime by exposing illegal behaviour or unfair

Our own recent field research in China has shown that many peasants are not interested in elections at the township level yet, but they are very keen to participate in their own village's political affairs and acknowledge the regime's efforts to give them more influence.

So much of what is stated by China scholars in the field of political reform and regime legitimacy in contemporary China seems to be based on a very narrow understanding of how legitimacy is produced in this system and on insufficient knowledge of what actually happens "on the ground," i.e. in the local state (or beyond Beijing). We therefore argue in favour of a new research agenda concerning China's political reforms which takes the possibility seriously that one-party rule could be legitimate; to disaggregate the concept of legitimacy by looking at different functional, geographical and administrative areas of the PRC's political system; and by particularly taking account of the differences between the central and the local state.

The following four articles were first presented as contributions to a conference held in February 2005 on reforms and institutional change in the PRC organised by the editors in co-operation with the Protestant Academy of Loccum (Evangelische Akademie Loccum). The authors do not all follow the path that we have just carved out for a future research agenda on political reform in the PRC and they remain generally sceptical as to the democratic potential of *zhengzhi tizhi gaige*. Still, they have all taken the impact of political reform on state legitimation and regime stability in present-day China seriously, which the editors of this special issue find a most valuable approach to any systematic analysis of the Chinese political system.

Thomas P. Bernstein paints a bleak picture of Chinese village elections, one of the most prominent political reforms of the Communist regime in the reform era. First decided on an experimental basis in 1987, they were finally made obligatory for the whole country in 1998. Although viewed by many as the harbinger of more political reform and bottom-up democratisation in the future, the author finds that direct elections of villager committees have failed to push in this direction so far. The implementation quality of these elections has certainly improved over the years. People in the countryside have become accustomed to the idea that they can influence village politics through direct elections that make a noticeable contribution to turning Chinese peasants into citizens. However, the impact of elected village committees on local power and politics has remained limited. In many villages, power is held by a close network of local elites including village and township officials, clan heads and established business interests who disenfranchise the peasants either by buying them off or by bullying them into acquiescence. The village Party secretary remains the most influential figure in the village. As he would stick to the Party's line in any case of conflict and be strongly supported by the township Party

manipulation by local cadres resisting their looming loss of power. But even then, these elections may lead to more regime legitimacy in the long run as corrupt cadres can be voted out of office.

committee, there is not much political leeway for an elected VC chief. His influence derives more from his personal connections to the Party secretary and to township officials than from institutionalised authority rising from democratic rule and practice. Clans are also an important intervening factor in village elections. Although their impact can be negative or positive, villages with big clans usually find it difficult to stage elections that are intended to serve the public and not the parochial good. Generally, peasant grievances have become more numerous and intense in recent years due to illegal land requisitioning and widespread corruption by local cadres, suggesting that village elections have not been able to improve things very much. As it seems now, a new group of professional "peasant leaders" is rising in the Chinese countryside that's challenging the local power hierarchies and protecting peasants' rights. Even if direct village elections have made local governance more acceptable for peasants in some places, Bernstein concludes, the above-mentioned realities of power distribution make them structurally deficient as a means to effectively resolve grievances and conflict in rural China. Independent peasant associations would probably do much better, and the author indicates that this is the direction the central leadership should take if it wants to achieve more stability and legitimacy in the Chinese countryside.

Jean Pierre Cabestan focuses on the reform of the People's Congress system and asks to what extent one can speak of "true" parliamentarism in the PRC. His meticulous analysis shows that the local congresses – from the provincial level down to the township level – have indeed gradually increased their powers of government supervision and their autonomy from the Party apparatus since the beginning of the reform era. On the one hand, this is due to Party-sponsored changes to the Electoral Law, the latest of which dates from August 2004 and which brought about, among other issues, the institutionalisation of primaries before determining the final list of candidates when a congress election takes place. More influence on the part of the local congresses also stems from professionalisation concerning their main functions of drafting regulations, appointing officials and supervising the governments at their respective administrative levels. There have also been efforts to strengthen the bonds between the people and the local congresses between elections by implementing audition systems. However, the Party still controls the congresses by means of a sophisticated set of personnel policies and gentle pressure on deputies, especially in the Standing Committees, where Party membership is predominant. In the final part of his article, Cabestan looks at more recent developments within the National People's Congress, which serves as the role model for the local congresses. He finds quite encouraging signs of more genuine parliamentarism here, but also comes across clear limits of NPC autonomy vis-à-vis the Party. What's most important for the future of the People's Congress System, it seems, is the development of vested interests among the deputies, which make the congresses more self-confident in insisting on their constitutional powers, thus challenging Party supremacy. However, there can be no doubt that China's parliaments will always be severely jeopardised

by the Party's grip, which can only be reduced by more political reform separating the Party from the government system.

Nora Sausmikat discusses the political legitimacy of one-party rule in present-day China by focusing on ideological and intra-party reform. Tracing the CCP's ideological adjustments since 1978, she underlines the significance of Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" for the Party's enduring claim to spearhead the reform process. Private entrepreneurs and other modern "productive forces" have had to be integrated into the Party for the sake of maintaining its legitimacy, although the latter is in danger of becoming even more precarious as a result of this theoretical innovation. The CCP has embarked on a project of becoming a "people's party," a "professional party" and a "ruling party," making structural intra-party reform necessary to mediate the social friction and conflicts of interest that inevitably enter its rank and file with the co-optation of private entrepreneurs and modern professionals. Sausmikat shows how these changes were resisted by the established Party elite, though to no avail. Meanwhile, new "theoretical concepts" sponsored by Hu Jintao – most prominently the recently formulated idea of a "harmonious society" – have conquered the ideological arena to adapt the Party further to the ever-changing social and political environment in the PRC. Sausmikat remains sceptical as to whether ideological and intra-party structural reform can eventually convey new legitimacy to the Party. Without successful social policies and genuine legal protection for the people, any such reform effort will be non-effective. In the end, it may be concluded from the author's contribution, the people are the ones who will bring about change and progress, not a refurbished ideology or more democratic supervision within a Party that is struggling for survival.

At first sight, *Shih Chih-yu* deals with a more peripheral topic with respect to political reform as he focuses on China's anti-poverty policy. However, the contradiction between the official concept of *fu-pin* ("helping the poor") relying on village income growth and market competition on the one hand and negative local responses to this approach on the other points at one important aspect which any reform endeavour in the PRC must seriously consider: without a proper institutional design that takes account of the specific historical, economic and social circumstances and traditions within a community, the reform is almost certainly doomed to failure. In Western Hunan, the official *fu-pin* campaign has fallen short of its objectives so far because it hasn't been able to overcome the mixture of institutional and structural disadvantages that characterise most poor villages – often (but wrongly) called "cultural backwardness." It makes sense to the peasants to unproductively consume the resources that the state channels down to them to spur market-driven development as a strategy to shield the peasants from state intervention. As the author notes, there is much more to be achieved for the state by turning to "ecological fu-pin" that draws on the villagers' experiences and inclination to use their specific environmental resources to make a better living. Such a change would redirect the state's official anti-poverty policy and also make the state reconsider the current mode of government-

led environmental protection measures. It would force the state to listen to the people before reforms are conceptualised. Such a stance may become a precondition for successful development in the Chinese countryside and for new political legitimacy, as it would be based on the support of the people who are now empowered to become confident political actors. In this sense, Shi Chih-yu's article sends out a message that is particularly important in the context of top-down political reform in contemporary China, since it points at the discursive power of the people to influence reforms – and at the expediency for the regime to respond to this emancipatory gesture in a positive manner.

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