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Author(s): Bruce Gilley

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THE “END OF POLITICS” IN BEIJING*

Bruce Gilley

The cancellation of the annual leadership retreat at Beidaihe was among the most celebrated acts of Hu Jintao in his first year as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The decision was heralded in China and abroad as a step forward in Chinese politics. Yet it may have been a step backward for the emergence of political competition.

Since the early reform era, Beidaihe had been an important venue for the expression of political differences among elites. The meetings there, recalled in various memoirs by Party officials,¹ provided an opportunity for real debate amidst a broad group of people who were permitted by informal norms to contest state and party policies. With its demise, the decisions that would have been reached there through consultative processes will probably be reached in Beijing through less contested processes.² As the Beijing-backed Hong Kong magazine *Guang jiaojing* commented: “The special role of the Beidaihe meetings in providing a forum for consultations, exchanges, explorations and communications on important state matters and personnel arrangements is hard to replace.”³ It is easy to forget that many Party elders are more liberal than the

* My thanks to Andrew Nathan, June Dreyer, Edward Friedman, Lynn White and three anonymous reviewers for comments on early drafts of this paper.

¹ See Wu Jiang, *Shinian zhi lu: he Hu Yaobang xiangchude rizi* (The 10-Year Road: My Days with Hu Yaobang) (Hong Kong: Mirror Cultural Enterprises, 1996); Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York: New York Review Books, 2nd edition, 2003), Ch. 4, section on Luo Gan.

² A former aide to the liberal Hu Yaobang, Wu Jiang, said: “Beidaihe was most popular among the old cadres because it is not always easy for them to participate in decision making in Beijing”. Quoted in Joseph Kahn, “Chinese Leader Cancels Communists’ Seaside Retreat”, *New York Times*, 4 August 2003, p. A2.

³ Xia Nanfang, “Beidaihe huiyi huo jiangcheng lishi” (The Beidaihe Meeting Looks Like It’s History), *Guang jiaojing* (Wide Angle, Hong Kong), 16 August 2003, p. 21.

mainstream orthodoxy represented by Hu and Wen; to have put an end to a forum that elicited their input means less liberal dissent. In this and many other ways, Hu Jintao has bolstered a trend in national politics that has been in evidence since the mid-1990s: the decline of contestation, meaning legitimated contention over state and Party policies by a sanctioned group. This decline is a key characteristic of the national-level Party–state system at present.

In Robert Dahl’s framework of polyarchy, a polity develops along two major lines: participation and contestation.⁴ While the former concerns the question of “who” gets included among the political classes, the latter determines “what” politics is about, the nature and limits of “opposition, public contestation or political competition”.

A state may move towards polyarchy along either axis, sometimes by choice and sometimes by force. Yet in a state that maintains an upper hand over society, it may not move at all. This is China at present, where participation has been frozen at the level of village elections for over a decade while contestation, which appeared in the early reform era, has been beaten back over the past decade. In Dahl’s scheme, China today looks much more like a “closed hegemony” than anything resembling an evolving polyarchy.⁵

The term “end of politics” is used by political scientists when discussing democratic countries, to refer to citizens’ decline in faith in and engagement with formal political institutions and mass parties—in other words, participation.⁶ In China, by contrast, an end-of-politics syndrome is appearing through a decline in elite contestation. The disengaged citizenry of the West find their counterparts in the disengaged senior cadres of China’s Party.

Contestation is the most important facet of an institutionalized political system. In Samuel P. Huntington’s formulation, institutionalization is defined as the process by which features of a political system develop “adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence”.⁷ More recent definitions focus on how the political system operates according to norms that are widely known and accepted. Several scholars have argued that the PRC system has indeed become

⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

⁵ China’s rating on a scale of -10 to +10 for the degree of political openness and contestation, according to the Polity IV system, is -7, putting it among the world’s most closed dictatorships. Available at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity>.

⁶ This thesis has been challenged by other scholars, who argue that participation has simply shifted to other avenues such as protest, lobbying, the legal system and public opinion. See Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 12.

more institutionalized in recent years,⁸ some pointing to evidence of rationalization,⁹ legalization¹⁰ and technocratization.¹¹

Yet institutionalized political competition is critical to success in institutionalizing law, regulations and succession. It creates the norm-based space for disagreement or competition on a range of policy and personnel issues. It may include both formal and informal political competition, as it does in most political systems. What separates it from uninstitutionalized competition is that it occurs within agreed "rules of the game" by agreed actors. In China, I will argue, both formal contestation, through the National People's Congress for example, as well as informal contestation through centre-provincial bargaining, for instance, have lessened, not increased, in recent years.

Thus, while not disputing the progress that China has made in other aspects of institutionalization, it has regressed in the institutionalization of political competition. Contestation has become less coherent and complex (in the Huntington sense) than it was in the 1980s and early 1990s and less constrained by accepted norms (in the modern sense). For this reason the overall level of institutionalization remains modest at best.¹²

Political History

Attempts to repress sanctioned political competition have been termed anti-politics, de-politicization or the end of politics. Authoritarian regimes, of course, are founded on the idea of anti-politics, and the People's Republic of China is no exception. After a brief period of genuine contestation in the early 1950s, when the Party allowed its civil war allies to hold some cabinet posts, Mao put an end to politics through a series of fearsome personal interventions and a highly ideological commitment to unitary principles guiding society and the state. Participation was expanded during the Cultural Revolution, but the scope for choice remained highly circumscribed.

⁸ See, e.g., Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2003), pp. 6-17; also Susan Shirk, "Will the Institutionalization of Party Leadership Survive the 2002-3 Succession?", *The China Journal*, No. 45 (January 2001), pp. 139-42.

⁹ Dali L. Yang, "Rationalizing the Chinese State: The Political Economy of Government Reform", in Chien-min Chao and Bruce J. Dickson (eds), *Remaking the Chinese State: Strategies, Society and Security* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 19-45.

¹⁰ Randall Peerenboom, "Ruling the Country in Accordance with Law: Reflections on the Rule and Role of Law in China", *Cultural Dynamics*, No. 11 (November 1999), pp. 315-51.

¹¹ Li Cheng and Lynn White, "The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (March 1998), pp. 245-7.

¹² See my "The Limits of Authoritarian Resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2003), pp. 18-26.

After Mao's death in 1976, participation was reduced with the banning of public political debates, political posters, strikes and mass movements. This was somewhat mitigated by the introduction of direct elections for village heads and county-level People's Congress delegates. More important, there was a re-introduction of legitimate and sanctioned contestation among Party and social elites. In the 1980s the leadership debated the question of economic reforms and whether to accompany this with political change. Party general secretaries Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang allowed genuine debate within the Politburo, while Party elders consulted among themselves and with Politburo members.¹³ One Western scholar even heralded the arrival of something close to "normal politics".¹⁴ The external manifestations of this included a rise in student protests and media freedoms.

Some measure of contestation survived past Tiananmen in 1989. In the first half of the 1990s, Deng's Southern Tour, multiple "Ten Thousand Character Documents" from leftists, nationalist tracts from neo-authoritarians and frequent outbursts from the national and provincial People's Congresses reflected an elite still contesting within the polity. National People's Congress (NPC) vice chairman Tian Jiyun famously called for a further expansion of both participation and contestation in 1995,¹⁵ but it was a last gasp. What ensued from the mid-1990s onward was a generation under Jiang Zemin committed not so much to one sort of contestation over another as to no contestation at all. Would-be agents of contestation—liberals like Qiao Shi and Li Ruihuan, military aggrandizers like Yang Baibing and careerists like Chen Xitong—were purged because they were political, not because of their politics.¹⁶

Jiang formally revived Deng's dictum of "don't argue" (*bu zhenglun*) in 1998.¹⁷ Deng's purpose had been to replace ideological with empirical arguments (practice being the sole criterion of truth), but Jiang's aim was to curtail such

¹³ See Wu Jiang, *Ten Years*; Wu Guoguang, *Zhao Ziyang yu zhengzhi gaige* (Zhao Ziyang and Political Reform) (Hong Kong: Pacific Press, 1997). On the contestation over economic, rural and ideological reforms in the 1980s see Joseph Fewsmith, *Elite Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 38-52, 98-103.

¹⁴ Frederick Teiwes, "The Paradoxical Post-Mao Transition: From Obeying the Leader to 'Normal Politics'", *The China Journal*, No. 34 (July 1995), pp. 55-94. Likewise, Joseph Fewsmith, in a paper first delivered in 1995, wrote: "If power is no longer so closely linked to policy, political competition is likely to be more 'normal'", *Elite Politics in Contemporary China*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Talk to Guangdong delegates at the NPC. *Wenhuibao*, Hong Kong, 16 March 1995.

¹⁶ The animus behind these purges is evident from accounts by an exiled Party member who writes under the pseudonym Zong Hairen. See Nathan and Gilley; *China's New Rulers*, Chs. 2 and 6.

¹⁷ Feng Zhirui, "Zhonggong zhuzhang huibi dangnei zhengduan" (The Party Advocates Avoiding Internal Party Differences), *Jingbao* (Mirror Magazine) (Hong Kong), September 1998, pp. 36-9.

argument altogether. His new slogan, “pay attention to politics” (*jiang zhengzhi*), was no less ironic than Mao’s “politics above all” (*zhengzhi yadao yiqie*) in its drive to eliminate politics. The anti-political trend continues in the Hu Jintao era now dawning.

China has thus returned, after a brief interlude of contestation that might be dated from approximately 1976 to the mid-1990s, to a period of anti-politics in which both participation and contestation are repressed by unitary principles of rule. It would be too much to say that it has lurched from one form of totalitarianism to another, given the reduction in state control over society and the *de facto* pluralism that exists within the state itself. However, repression of contestation at the national level has returned.

Evidence of Change

Visible eruptions of NPC activism are one good indicator of the decline of contestation.¹⁸ In the 1980s and early 1990s, large non-approval votes over policies like special legislative powers for Shenzhen (40 per cent non-approval), the Three Gorges dam (33 per cent) and the national banking law (32 per cent) were commonplace.¹⁹ In 1995, 37 per cent of delegates failed to approve the appointment of Li Peng’s corrupt associate Jiang Chunyun as vice premier, while in 1998 a record-high 45 per cent failed to approve the procurator-general’s report.

That was the high point, however. In 1998, the contestatory Qiao Shi was replaced as NPC chairman by the anti-political Li Peng. Since then, the most dramatic event in NPC politics has been a committee-level rejection of a highway tolls law in 1999. At the 2003 meeting, the NPC was asked to confirm state appointments for three close allies of outgoing Party head Jiang Zemin—Zeng Qinghong as vice president, Huang Ju as executive vice premier and Chen Zhili as state councillor. Despite being widely disliked or distrusted in the Party at large—shown by the difficulties all three faced in gaining appointments in the central Party–state in the 1990s²⁰—the non-approval rates for the three hovered between 9 per cent and 13 per cent. At the same meeting, one of the few active delegates to the NPC was mysteriously stripped of her position.²¹

The autonomy of the provincial People’s Congresses, meanwhile, is being suffocated. In 1987, every one of the 29 provincial-level People’s Congresses was chaired by a person other than the Party secretary or provincial governor.

¹⁸ The best discussion on this era is Murray Scot Tanner, *The Politics of Lawmaking in Post-Mao China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). The figures in this paragraph except for 1998 all come from Table 5.2, pp. 84-8.

¹⁹ Non-approval includes votes against, abstentions and present but not voting.

²⁰ See Nathan and Gilley, *China’s New Rulers*.

²¹ The story of Yao Xiurong is detailed in Kristen Looney, “The Rise and Fall of Yao Xiurong”, China elections special report, July 2003, available at www.chinaelections.org.

Provincial contestation was revealed vividly in 1993 when the Party's candidates for governor were turned down by congresses in six provinces.²² That spurred an effort by Beijing to reduce contestation at this elite provincial level, which bears on the national polity. By the middle of 2003, 24 of 31 provincial-level congresses were chaired by the provincial Party Secretary. Other than Hubei, the exceptions are all either rich coastal provinces and cities where contestation is harder to suppress or ethnic-minority Autonomous Regions where the party tries to maintain an appearance of contested politics.

The consultative system for non-Party figures, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and its eight "democratic parties", showed signs of emerging as a genuine source of contestation in the 1980s and early 1990s.²³ Since the mid-1990s, however, this system has also been eviscerated, as it was in North Korea and in Communist-era Eastern Europe. The last major stand of the CPPCC was in 1993, against the Three Gorges dam. After taking over as chair of the body in 1993, Li Ruihuan sought to continue the contestatory momentum, in line with Deng's hopes.²⁴ But Li's attempts to make the CPPCC a force for contestation failed. This was dismissed as "interference" by the anti-political Jiang and Li Peng.²⁵ Under the new head, Politburo Standing Committee member Jia Qinglin, a Jiang ally, the CPPCC is likely to be weakened further.

At the top, claims that the Party has somehow become more democratic, that the Politburo or even the Central Committee are part of a new contestorate where views matter, simply do not stand up to evidence. The regular convening of Party congresses is an institutionalized procedure, but the role of the congress, as well as of the Central Committee and the Politburo, in contesting policies and personnel decisions—institutionalized political competition—is notably absent.

In the 2002–03 leadership transition, virtually all top personnel decisions were made by just two men, Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, in contravention of attempts by the wider Party elite to build norms of collective decision-making.²⁶ Of the nine new Standing Committee members, four (Zeng Qinghong, Li Changchun, Huang Ju and Jia Qinglin) appear to have been chosen by Jiang Zemin, one (Luo Gan) by Li Peng, one (Wu Bangguo) by both men and one (Wen Jiabao) by Premier Zhu Rongji. The Politburo approved every one of these

²² They were Sichuan, Guizhou, Zhejiang, Hainan, Hubei and Heilongjiang. I have compiled this information from various sources that are available upon request.

²³ See Anita Chan, "Political Opposition in China", in Garry Rodan (ed.), *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 163-87. Also James D. Seymour, *China's Satellite Parties* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1987).

²⁴ See Gerry Groot, "Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work, Minor Parties and Groups, Hegemony and Corporatism", PhD Dissertation, University of Adelaide, 1997.

²⁵ Nathan and Gilley, *China's New Rulers*, p. 79.

²⁶ Nathan and Gilley, *China's New Rulers*, Chs 1 and 2.

decisions, lacking the capacity to challenge them, while the full Central Committee received only abbreviated biographies of the chosen successors. Hu Jintao, meanwhile, was chosen in 1992 by Party elder Song Ping and endorsed by Deng. That leaves just one member of the new Standing Committee (Wu Guanzheng) who can be said to have risen on the basis of anything like institutionalized political competition.

In the new leadership, virtually all power resides with four Standing Committee members—Hu, Wen, Zeng and Luo—and their main patrons Jiang and Li Peng. One Shanghai scholar, writing in an influential military-backed journal, warns appositely that the PRC is in danger of becoming a “sultanistic regime”.²⁷ There is little or no substance to the “political reforms” introduced by Hu Jintao since taking office, whether it be his rhetorical appeal for more inner-party democracy or the submission of bland summaries of Politburo decisions to the Central Committee. Actual and not feigned contestation is at issue. *Glasnost* led to change in the Soviet Union because it was accompanied by the right to contest. *Glasnost* without contestation is merely informed political exclusion.

Several books have portrayed the post-Tiananmen period as one of intense political disagreement.²⁸ Certainly, this was true until the mid-1990s. Yet disagreements since then have been expressed more and more through non-sanctioned means by non-sanctioned actors. The elite battles evident today are based on illegitimate end-running, not legitimate contestation. Thus the politics of contestation—legitimate competition within the structures of the polity properly used by a range of agreed actors—remains absent, even if “crypto-politics”—the unsanctioned factional struggles that misuse policies and structures as their tools—flourishes.²⁹ The earnestness of contestation in the early reform era has been replaced by the anomie of compliance or the intrigue of crypto-politics in the post-reform era. As the purged liberal Li Ruihuan noted in vivid language:

In recent years people talk nonsense, and cadres like to put themselves on display like flowerpots on a stand. Flattery and overstatement daily gets more serious. Such incorrect social and political work-styles have led to an increasing prevalence of cadres who steer with the wind, so that there’s nobody any more among Party or government officials with any edges or corners (i.e., straight talk). There are more

²⁷ Xiao Gongqin, “Zhongguo houquannengxingde quanwei zhengzhi” (China’s Post-Totalitarian Authoritarianism), *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), Vol. 55, No. 6 (2002), pp. 82-8. The term “sultanistic regime” (translated as *sudanshi zhengquan*) was coined by American political scientist Juan Linz.

²⁸ See, for example, Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Willy Wo-lap Lam, *The Era of Jiang Zemin* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1999).

²⁹ The term comes from T. H. Rigby, “Crypto-Politics”, *Survey*, Vol. 50 (1964), pp. 192-3.

and more of the “you’re okay, I’m okay”, oily-head slippery-cheek, exquisitely-nimble-in-eight-directions kind of people.³⁰

Centre–provincial relations suffer notably from the “end of politics” syndrome. Of course, in a unitary state, such politics should not exist even in theory. But the reforms enhanced *de facto* provincial powers, which in turn created pressures for informal but sanctioned means of politics between the centre and regions. There were signs that this might emerge in the 1990s. Former Premier Zhu Rongji famously shed several kilograms undertaking a consultation exercise with provincial leaders on the tax reforms introduced in 1994. But a further institutionalization of centre–provincial political relations never emerged. Instead, Beijing since the mid-1990s has resumed an anti-political approach to national unity, which Michael C. Davis sums up as “political blustering and party networking”.³¹

This was evident in the reform of the electric-power sector between 1997 and 2002, where a “lack of legislative transparency” meant that threats and covert dealings decided outcomes,³² with provinces and localities “fighting to defend their fortresses” in the absence of institutionalized means of contestation.³³ Beijing had to fire senior Fujian power-sector bureaucrats and change the provincial governor (He Guoqiang, now a Politburo member and ironically head of the Party’s Organization Department) to force the province to comply with a rule on putting its power sector under national control. Other provinces were conquered with bribes for power-sector officials in the form of shares in large corporatized power plants. Creating normal channels of politics to reconcile central and local interests, a researcher on this writes, “depends on an established organizational framework operating within a legal system—something which is still lacking in China”.³⁴

The military, too, has been depoliticized as a force for contestation. This is a mixed blessing for the emergence of a healthy polyarchy. On the one hand, the military enjoys an unfair advantage as the keeper of arms and in some political systems may threaten to suppress other actors in contestation. On the other hand, as a source of intra-elite difference—as was briefly the case in the 1980s and early 1990s when prominent generals like Liu Huaqing and Yang Baibing took part in political decision-making—the military can ensure some degree of

³⁰ Nathan and Gilley, *China’s New Rulers*, p. 80.

³¹ Michael C. Davis, “The Case for Chinese Federalism”, *Journal of Democracy*, April 1999, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 125.

³² Hong Kong-based power-sector lawyer George Zhu, quoted in *The South China Morning Post*, 12 March 2002, p. 3.

³³ Xu Yi-chong, *Powering China: Reforming the Electric Power Industry in China* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 162.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.197.

political competition. More recently, though, not only has there been a de-politicization of the military but also a de-politicization of the military issue area, a separate matter. Security affairs are now the exclusive preserve of the Central Military Commission and of a few top members of the Party elite. China's military and security strategy is, so to speak, out of bounds, even though open debates continue on how to become a responsible global power. The darkened windows of contestation at home are even more striking in light of the emerging signs of a politically adept foreign policy—evidenced in Beijing's role in the North Korea crisis and its diplomatic serenade in Southeast Asia in 2003.

An indirect sign of declining contestation is the paucity of women at the top. There is just one female on the 24-member Politburo (Wu Yi), and two in the 35-member cabinet (Wu and Chen Zhili, a Jiang crony). Over the past two decades women have gained prominence in science, the media, business, academia, sport and many other spheres of endeavour, yet today only five women sit in the 198-member Central Committee, the lowest figure in PRC history. Female participation thrives in open polities and suffers in closed hegemonies, perhaps because women are more comfortable than men in diverse and egalitarian settings.³⁵ The inability of women to make their mark in politics is the canary in the coal mine of China's poisoned polyarchy.

It is notable that politics has not declined at the local level, and indeed may be continuing to increase there. There has been an emergence of real contestation in some provinces, especially wealthy ones like Guangdong, Fujian and Jiangsu, which face the most pressing need to forge a consensus on governance.³⁶ Challenges are coming from people like Yao Lifa, an anti-corruption and education crusader whose candidacy for the Qianjiang City People's Congress in Hubei Province was rejected by the Party three times before a mass signature campaign brought him to office.³⁷

There are also some specific-issue areas at the national level where genuine contestation seems to have survived. One of these is the securities and stock-market sector where an active media, listed companies with savvy public relations departments, globally-minded regulators and a mostly hands-off State Council have combined to create a kind of “special zone” of political

³⁵ Steven M. Fish cites this in explanations of why Islamic countries are less democratic. See his “Islam and Authoritarianism”, *World Politics*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (October 2002), pp. 4-38.

³⁶ Ming Xia, “Political Contestation and the Emergence of the Provincial People's Congresses as Power Players in Chinese Politics: A Network Explanation”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 9, No. 24 (2000), pp. 185-214.

³⁷ On Yao Lifa, see John Pomfret, “Bringing Revolution to China's Villages; Democracy Activists Challenge Old Guard”, *Washington Post*, 15 September 2002, p. A1.

competition. The pros and cons of policy changes, institutional shifts and even personnel appointments are debated there more freely.³⁸

But on most matters of state and Party policy at the national level, predictions that the loose contestation of the early reform era would give way to a more robust contestation—"a gradual institutionalization of factional loyalties around different policy tendencies and social preferences"³⁹—have not come true. China has moved not towards "normal politics" but towards an "end of politics".

Surrogates for Politics

Andreas Schedler identifies two main dimensions to the "anti-political" tendency. One is the rejection of a pluralism of interests and viewpoints in favour of an imagined and exigent unity of interests. Difference is denied rather than reconciled: "Political resistance is seen to originate either from ignorance or from irrationality, and political discussion is dismissed as a waste of time, which opens politics to corruption and inefficiency".⁴⁰

The second and consequent dimension is the search for and imposition of a singular form of rationality or a unitary principle onto political debate, akin to what political philosophers would call a change in "public reason". In this new rationality, certain considerations (like international best practice or *guoji guanli*) are made dominant, while others (like ancestral tradition) are ruled out. Dick Howard notes that unitary principles are intended to eliminate responsibility and judgment from public decisions.⁴¹ Marxism and capitalism share a belief that the imperatives of a unitary principle (socialism in the one case, the market in the other) should override democratic debate and choice.

Many political theories since the Enlightenment have sought to define the best unitary principle, rejecting the indeterminacy and instability of democratic politics in which a people defines its own choices on the basis of equality. Bentham's utilitarianism, Dewey's "method of intelligence" and contemporary China's *guoji guanli* have much in common. There is nothing particularly "Chinese" about this phenomenon; it is as old and universal as political philosophy itself.

³⁸ This may be a result of the imperatives forced on the Party by fiscal crisis and state enterprise underperformance. See Stephen Green, *China's Stock Market: A Guide to Its Progress, Players and Prospects* (London: Profile/Economist Books, 2003).

³⁹ Lowell Dittmer, "The Changing Shape of Elite Power Politics", *The China Journal*, No. 45 (January 2001), p. 67.

⁴⁰ Andreas Schedler, "Introduction", in Andreas Schedler (ed.), *The End of Politics? Explorations into Modern Antipolitics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), pp. 1-20.

⁴¹ Dick Howard, *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 131-5.

These two dimensions of anti-politics—a unity of interests and a unitarian principle—are apparent in China today, the first in the doctrine of economyism (*jingji zhuyi*), and the second in the doctrine of proceduralism.

Economyism is a legacy of Marxist thinking (and perhaps of China’s tradition of this-worldly thinking). It has slowly become the dominant thrust of policy in handling Taiwan, Tibet, state enterprise reform, urban unrest and much else since the mid-1990s. It is premised on a belief that the immense wars of the spirit that threaten Party rule can be won by changing economic conditions and thereby reorienting spirits, which are merely derivative.⁴² The false consciousness of Tibetan nuns and relocated urban commuters alike can be overcome with better modes of production. Thus, whereas politics is seen as divisive and representing “partial interests” (*jubu liyi*), economic development ultimately promotes harmony and represents “overall interests”. Hence the Party’s obsession with unlocking and representing “advanced productive forces”, the core of its new ideology of the “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao*). The withered state of Marxist China has become the withered polity of capitalist China.

The last gasp of real politics on the Taiwan issue, for example, came in 1993 when the heads of each side’s semi-official contact group met in Singapore. That event appears extraordinary in the light of the single-minded attention paid today by Beijing to investment and trade ties. The political olive branches of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian go unheeded on the de-politicized mainland. Leaders in Beijing are blissfully confident that economic ties will overwhelm false consciousness in Taiwan, as elsewhere.⁴³

Proceduralism (*chengxu zhuyi*), echoing the derogation of formalism (*xingshi zhuyi*) in Marxism, is an attempt to deal with what decisions remain through processes that are blind to outcomes. It is the new “public reason” of China. Laws and regulations are to act like a Hobbesian sovereign imposing order on a world of self-seeking agents, and the result will be beneficial by definition. At the 16th Party Congress in 2002, the Party pledged to promote “socialist political civilization” (*shehui zhuyi zhengzhi wenming*), which Jiang Zemin earlier defined as a polity that is “institutionalized and standardized and that operates by following proper procedures”.⁴⁴

Proceduralism is key to the notion of “technocracy”—officialdom guided by markets and scientific expertise. The regulations for new appointments announced in July 2002 seek to choose cadres through “scientific” procedures.

⁴² “Economyism” has also been a predictive thesis of modernization theorists, which is one reason why engagement with China seems to create strange bedfellows of pro-CCP and anti-CCP forces in Western policy circles. Some scholars have taken issue with the thesis as applied to China. See David Zweig, “Undemocratic Capitalism: China and the Limits of Economyism”, *The National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999).

⁴³ See Nathan and Gilley, *China’s New Rulers*, Ch. 8, sections on Taiwan and Tibet.

⁴⁴ The term appears to have first been used by Jiang Zemin in a talk at the Central Party School in May 2002. See Xinhua News Agency, 31 May 2002.

Candidates considered controversial or “objectionable” are to be eliminated. It is what I have elsewhere termed a new Platonic Republic of China, a place where the population is kept at a distance from the political processes while philosopher-guardians divine the “true” (or in today’s language “scientific”) course.⁴⁵ This new public reason reduces politics to the aggregation of selfish interests by scientific technocrats.

The chimera of science as a surrogate for politics has a long history in political philosophy, of course, going back to the French revolutionary philosopher Saint-Simon, who believed that society could be organized along industrial lines with scientists serving as spiritual leaders. In 19th-century Europe, though, mass demands for a role in defining social goals led to an expansion of democracy at the expense of experts. Scientism survived in China, however, first as scientific democracy in the first half of the 20th century,⁴⁶ then as scientific socialism until the late 1970s and today as scientific technocracy. Premier Wen Jiabao has called for “a system of scientific democracy-style decision-making that unites leaders, experts and the masses”.⁴⁷ Despite its immanent notion of contestation, that doctrine has so far been interpreted more as “science” than as democracy.

Many Chinese intellectuals are attracted by the elitism of technocracy⁴⁸ and praise its rise while denigrating the realm of the political. They believe, writes one critic, that it has “left the new technocrats, now liberated from entanglement in ideological squabbles, free to make more or less independent decisions based on functional rationality and cost-effectiveness”.⁴⁹ Yet there are costs. David Beetham notes that “wherever science serves as a source of legitimacy, it works in an anti-democratic direction by assigning the power of decision-making to the expert at the expense of the citizen”.⁵⁰ Chinese intellectuals, as Lynn White notes,

⁴⁵ Bruce Gilley, “A New ‘Plato’s Republic’ in China”, *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2002, p. A7.

⁴⁶ See Danny W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

⁴⁷ In Chinese, *you lingdao zhuanjia he qunzhong xiang jiehedexue minzhude juece jizhi*. Quoted in Qiu Feng, “Zhongguo xin yibode zhengzhi gaige” (China’s New Round of Political Reforms), *Guang jiaojing*, 16 April 2003, p. 8. Wen Jiabao announced this at his first cabinet meeting on March 19, 2003.

⁴⁸ On this, and the attraction of scientism to them, see Alexander Woodside, “Exalting the Latecomer State: Intellectuals and the State during the Chinese and Vietnamese Reforms”, *The China Journal*, No. 40 (July 1998), pp. 9-36.

⁴⁹ Xiao Gongqin, “The Rise of the Technocrats”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2003), p. 63.

⁵⁰ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 73.

“have studiously ignored the anti-democratic aspects of the notion that credentialled knowledge confers a right to rule”.⁵¹

A non-contested bureaucracy is valuable if the decisions it carries out are reached by a contested executive. But rather than a depoliticized state being run by a political party, the political party is being taken over by a depoliticized state.⁵² Some scholars talk about the “corporatization” of the Party. Decisions once taken by a *ganbu* (cadre) representing a particular ideology are now made by a *gongwuyuan* (civil servant) representing nothing.

At the pediment of the procedural temple is the constitution. In December 2002, just three weeks after taking over as Party General Secretary, Hu Jintao urged a “comprehensive” implementation of the state constitution.⁵³ A group of retired Party officials urged Hu to follow through by enhancing the powers of the People’s Congresses and making Party decisions more transparent.⁵⁴ Yet in subsequent months Hu showed that his intention was quite the opposite: to suppress politics by appeals to hollow slogans like “constitutionalism” and “inner-Party democracy”.

Constitutionalism, as envisaged by Hu and others, is a way to establish a reign of quiescence over those who would contest. It is a constitutionalism stripped of the political life that makes constitutions powerful symbols of deliberative agreements in open polities. In the wrong hands, constitutions entrench tyranny—recall the prominence of constitutionalism in the Philippines in the Marcos years (1972 to 1986). With the elimination of the political competition that gives meaning to constitutions, constitutionalism becomes a *de facto* entrenchment of the strong. To quote Randall Peerenboom on proposals by China’s neo-authoritarians for a constitutional state: “In a pluralistic society ... individuals inevitably will disagree about what is fair and just and judge laws in terms of their own interests. Hence the need for politics to work out the conflicts”.⁵⁵ The police harassment in 2003 of constitutional reform advocate Cao Siyuan reflected the uncontestable nature of constitutionalism under Hu Jintao.

⁵¹ Lynn White, “SARS, Anti-Populism, and Elite Lies: Diseases from which China can Recover”, in P.C. Leung and E.E. Oi (eds), *SARS War: Combating the Disease* (Singapore: World Scientific, forthcoming).

⁵² See Michal Korzec, “China’s Political Reforms are Breaking New Ground: Party and State”, *The South China Morning Post*, 29 January 2003, p. 13.

⁵³ Xinhua News Agency, 4 December 2002.

⁵⁴ “Yi xie lao tongzhi yu shijie renda zhaokai qianxi xiegei Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao de xin” (A Letter to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao Written by some Old Comrades on the Eve of the Opening of the 10th NPC), Beijing, 23 February 2003. Supplied to the author by Zong Hairen.

⁵⁵ Randall Peerenboom, “A Government of Laws: Democracy, Rule of Law and Administrative Law Reform in the PRC”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 34 (2003), p. 63.

China's constitution is supposed to be interpreted by the National People's Congress, but this is headed by Politburo Standing Committee member Wu Bangguo. It is supposed to be implemented by a Central Politics and Law Commission, but this is headed by Standing Committee member Luo Gan. Liberal dissenter Bao Tong, a former member of the Party elite, has noted the emptiness of constitutionalism in the hands of Party absolutism.⁵⁶

Explanations

The decline of national contestation cannot be explained with reference to the appearance of some hitherto elusive "consensus" among members of the political elite. While the move to markets and the end of Marxist ideology are widely supported, divergent views are evident on key matters concerning political reforms, diplomatic policies and socio-economic development strategies. Moreover, the possibility that complete consensus exists on the moral and empirical nature of the public good recedes daily in an increasingly diverse country of 1.3 billion people. It seems implausible to explain the decline of contestation as the result of a happy agreement on policy matters.

Nor has it declined simply because the PRC is a dictatorship. While authoritarian regimes by their nature must limit political competition, this still leaves wide scope for a variety of forms. A Party-led China could still be a contested China. Enough space was carved out for political competition in PRI-ruled Mexico and UMNO-ruled Malaysia to allow a resilient political system and some economic development. Authoritarianism does not require the elimination of contestation. Dahl's "competitive oligarchy" means, precisely, an authoritarian regime with wide contestation.

One possible explanation is political culture. Might it be that a Chinese cultural preference for harmony, tragically misused by Mao, has finally emerged triumphant? Chinese scholars regularly assert that "the Chinese people prize authority and order. When their lives are disturbed by tremors in the political environment they feel distressed".⁵⁷ Surveys have shown that mainland citizens were considerably less amenable to political pluralism in the 1990s than their counterparts in Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁵⁸ Zhu Rongji was a rarity in claiming to be a politician (*zhengke*), a word that the anti-political mandarins of post-Mao China made into an insult, redolent of the corrupt Republican era. This stance is particularly strong among the generation of Hu Jintao, which was influenced by

⁵⁶ Bao Tong, *Zhongguode yousi* (Pondering China) (Hong Kong: Pacific Century Press, 2000), p. 121.

⁵⁷ Jiang Jinsong, *The National People's Congress of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2003), p. 553.

⁵⁸ Chu Yun-han and Chang Tu-tzung, "Culture Shift and Regime Legitimacy: Comparing Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong" in Hua Shiping (ed); *Chinese Political Culture: 1989-2000* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 320-347, Table 12.2, p. 332-3.

anti-political critiques of the Cultural Revolution, especially since these may invoke memories of personal misdoing.⁵⁹

Yet political culture is as much a consequence as a cause of politics. Political culture changed rapidly in Taiwan and South Korea with the successful introduction of democracy there. The belief in monistic cultural norms, writes Edward Friedman, "presumes an apolitical Chinese uniqueness" that is at odds with all cross-country evidence.⁶⁰

How might China's institutions explain the end of politics? Contestation is possible only when it does not threaten elite stability—a critical dimension of state capacity in authoritarian regimes. It is well known that the weaker the norms of conduct, the more unsettling is contestation in an authoritarian regime. Those norms are derived from many sources, but a primary source in the post-Mao era was the Party elders, who enforced a certain stability of ideas and behaviour. Jiang's multiple purges of contestator members between 1993 and 1997 all required the blessing of retired political elders.

Those elders mostly died in the 1990s.⁶¹ Thus a functional explanation can be found: that the death of the elders made continued contestation a threat to elite stability. In contrast to conventional views of the elders as a restraint on political competition, this explanation suggests that they were its foundation, given the well-known problem of managing intra-elite conflicts in authoritarian regimes. A simple back-of-the-envelope model can illustrate how the death or removal of party elders from the polity might cause instability to rise for every given level of contestation.⁶² The result is that a regime seeking to maximize legitimacy will curtail the degree of contestation. Governance will worsen.

⁵⁹ See Jasper Becker, "Did China's New Leaders Take Part in a School Bloodbath?", *The Independent*, 8 March 2003, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Edward Friedman, "A Comparative Politics of Democratization in China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 34 (2003), p. 115.

⁶¹ Of the "Eight Immortals" whose intervention was decisive during the 1989 Tiananmen protests, seven (Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Peng Zhen, Wang Zhen, Yang Shangkun, Deng Yingchao and Li Xiannian) had died by 1998. Bo Yibo was still alive as of 2003.

⁶² Assume that an authoritarian political system aims to maximize legitimacy (L), which depends both on the positive contributions from governance (G) and the negative contributions from elite instability (E). Both factors are functions of contestation (c). Thus $L = G(c) - E(c)$. Now suppose governance is a positive function of contestation, or $G' > 0$. And suppose that elite instability is a strictly convex function that declines with initial levels of contestation ("We can enhance unity by debating within the Politburo Standing Committee on some occasions behind closed doors") but then rises with further contestation ("If we allow this debate to expand to the entire Politburo or Central Committee it will cause disunity"). Thus the minimum is reached when $E' = 0$. The death or removal of elders causes instability to rise at all levels of contestation and the minimum $E' = 0$ to occur at a lower level of contestation. Then, a simple maximization of the legitimacy function shows how optimal contestation declines when the stabilizing influence of Party elders disappears.

If this explanation is correct, then the decline of contestation is not a temporary blip but a structural result of the evolution of authoritarianism in post-elder China. Tony Saich, observing the decline in the NPC's contestatory powers in the 1990s, wrote hopefully that "a rolling back of the NPC's role for any period of time is unlikely".⁶³ Yet as we near a full decade of falling contestation, this roll-back looks decidedly sustained.

Costs

Some say that politics does not matter much in China.⁶⁴ The society and economy are too free and the political system is running well enough to make political competition unnecessary. The Hong Kong-based newsweekly *Asiaweek* even celebrated this "end of politics" in 2000: "Most young Chinese these days couldn't care less about who is up and who is down in the party Politburo".⁶⁵

Yet politics is and always will be central to any country because it is the collective life of a nation. The "basic structures" of today's China—the *laissez-faire* economy, the proceduralist government, etc.—are creations of politics. To say that they make political competition unnecessary is merely to say that political leaders have chosen to make this so.

Merely by reaching important decisions through uncontested procedures, the "end of politics" imposes costs on China in terms of injustice, something that is noted more and more in China itself.⁶⁶ Notable, too, are the instrumental costs. Contestation typically creates more durable policies, while crypto-politics creates unstable ones. The crypto-politics that allowed Jiang Zemin to remain as Central Military Commission chair after March 2003 begot a destabilizing behind-the-scenes power struggle almost immediately.⁶⁷ The same results are evident across

⁶³ Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 118.

⁶⁴ See David Bachman, "The Limits on Leadership in China", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, No. 11 (November 1992), pp. 1046-62. A more recent paper is Zhao Dingxin, "China's Prolonged Stability and Political Future", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28 (2001), pp. 427-44.

⁶⁵ "The End of Politics—The Market is the Moving Force Behind the New Asia", *Asiaweek*, No. 23 (November 2000).

⁶⁶ In a critique of the "behind-the-scenes manipulation" of the annual NPC meetings in March 2003, the Guangdong Party Committee newspaper *Nanfang Ribao* (Southern Daily), wrote: "From a certain point of view, it's not the results of democracy that are valuable but the process of democracy". Quoted in Qiu Feng, "Zhongguo xin yibode zhengzhi gaige" (China's New Round of Political Reforms), *Guang jiaojing*, 16 April 2003, p. 8.

⁶⁷ See James Mulvenon, "Reduced Budgets, the 'Two Centers', and Other Mysteries of the 2003 National People's Congress", *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 7 (2003). Also see Jonathan Ansfield, "Hu, Jiang Intrigue Clouds China's Reform Outlook", Reuters, 29 June 2003.

the board, whether it be centre–provincial relations,⁶⁸ environmental policy⁶⁹ or foreign investment policy.⁷⁰ “The decline of informal politics”, writes Jeremy Paltiel, “should ... not be viewed as a wholly positive development”.⁷¹

There is no “scientific” answer to many questions of governance—how to balance prevention against cure in healthcare, how to balance residential rights against developmental needs, how to determine pollution standards, how to share the pain of financial reform or find an acceptable level of income inequality. Without open politics, decisions are subject to dissent and subversion. One reason that China is experiencing “spontaneous democratization” at township and county levels is precisely because many places are desperately in need of politics.

At the top, a regime that has no contestation is less efficient and is prone to damaging internal splits. During the SARS crisis, criticisms of regime policy surfaced only in the media, not from the normal institutions of remonstrance, the People’s Congresses and People’s Political Consultative Committees. What forced action at the top was a combination of international pressures and popular unrest.⁷² As two Chinese scholars warned: “If within the Party there is just a harmonious mood, no dissenting views, no debates (*meiyou zhenglun*), then the Party will lose its life force”.⁷³

Politics cannot be “eliminated” despite the dreams of tidy-minded bureaucrats and elitist scholars. Even if it could be, the costs to the creation of a stable, prosperous and just society would be huge. “Politics”, wrote Bernard Crick in 1972, in the midst of the Western intellectual fetish for political order

⁶⁸ The lack of contestation in centre–provincial relations, a Chinese scholar notes, brings dire results: “Local warlords run amok, economic order is in chaos, while inflation, corruption, policy mistakes, social and political instability, crime and unstable social sentiments proliferate”. Lin Shangli, *Guonei zhengfu zhijian guanxi* (Relations between Government Levels) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang People’s Press, 1998), p. 345.

⁶⁹ William Alford and Benjamin Liebman, “Clean Air, Clear Processes? The Struggle over Air Pollution Law in the People’s Republic of China”, *Hastings Law Journal*, No. 52 (2001), pp. 703–48.

⁷⁰ The best sustained treatment of the economic distortions caused by Special Economic Zones and other instruments of foreign-investment policy in China is Huang Yasheng, *Selling China: Foreign Direct Investment During the Reform Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁷¹ Jeremy Paltiel, “Jiang Talks Politics—Who Listens? Institutionalization and its Limits in Market Leninism”, *The China Journal*, No. 45 (January 2001), p. 121.

⁷² John Pomfret, “President’s Move on SARS Followed Immense Pressure at Home, Abroad”, *Washington Post*, 13 May 2003, p. A1.

⁷³ Zhang Lei and Cheng Linsheng, *Zhuanxing yu wending* (Transformation and Stability) (Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 1999), p. 219.

that grew out of the post-colonial state failures, “is a great and civilizing human activity”.⁷⁴

The Future

The decline of politics has been an overture to the end of authoritarian regimes in other countries. Just a year before the fall of Suharto in Indonesia, for example, one scholar wrote of the “de-politicization” of the regime after years of higher levels of contestation.⁷⁵ Is this the Chinese Communist Party’s fate?

In his study of revolutions, Jeff Goodwin aligned states along three critical axes.⁷⁶ The first axis, the degree of inclusiveness, parallels the degree of participation of Dahl’s polyarchy. The second, the degree of bureaucratic–rational (versus patrimonial–clientelist) organization of the state, is a broader category. Certainly, it would include the regularized and legitimate contestation observed in Dahl’s polyarchy. It might also, ironically, include proceduralism. Finally, Goodwin highlights the capacity of the state. At the extreme, an exclusive, clientelist and weak state will incubate and be overthrown by revolutions—witness Marcos, Ceausescu, the Shah and Suharto.

The Party does not appear likely to follow in that path. Although participation is limited, there may be enough of it (through village elections, local People’s Congresses and public petitioning or *shangfang*) to blunt mass rebellion. Meanwhile, the transformation of the state along the procedural lines sketched above is helping to make the state more bureaucratic–rational, even if contestation is being curtailed. State capacity, finally, while weakened by fiscal deficits and unstable elite norms (the same ones that necessitated the end of politics), is upheld by a powerful public-security and Party apparatus.

Although the end of politics may have been prompted by the rising costs of elite instability, it exacts its own costs in misrule. Major crises of governance—environmental, fiscal, financial, health, rural, workplace, diplomatic and more—bedevil the country. Though these may not foment revolution, they exact a high toll on a country where social and economic interests as well as diverse viewpoints are proliferating by the day.

The Party, then, is caught in a bind of its own making. To avert revolution, it must introduce proceduralism and curtail elite–destabilizing contestation. Yet this worsens governance, raising greater demands for inclusion. While China may not

⁷⁴ Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 15.

⁷⁵ Jamie Mackie, “Indonesia: Economic Growth and Depoliticization”, in James W. Morely (ed.), *Driven by Growth: Political Change in the Asia–Pacific Region* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 123–41.

⁷⁶ Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

incubate a revolution, it is incubating unrest.⁷⁷ The country is stuck in an end-of-politics syndrome from which there appears to be no ready escape. One solution is a move towards an inclusive hegemony like Singapore or Malaysia. This was the road being considered in the 1980s but which was then closed off after Tiananmen. Proposals to expand direct elections, even under Party control, now fall on deaf ears.

The alternative solution is a reintroduction of contestation. Beijing University scholar Pan Wei’s widely-discussed proposal for greater “horizontal accountability” is essentially a call for renewed contestation—where various agencies of the state would monitor and restrain one another.⁷⁸ SARS presented just the sort of crisis that might prompt the political elite to introduce some form of contestation. Premier Wen Jiabao suggested this in the form of media scrutiny in a talk at Qinghua University on the May Fourth anniversary, when he spoke positively about “opening up the flow of information” to “enable the public to supervise the government and prevent social instability”.⁷⁹

Michael Dowdle believes that a largely hidden form of norm-based accountability already exists.⁸⁰ Yet, as mentioned, evidence is hard to find, suggesting that it is at best embryonic. The reason may be that contestation is difficult to bring about unilaterally. It usually arises as a result of a balance of powers at the top, exactly what is now so limited. Under their new Politburo Standing Committee proconsuls, the NPC and the CPPCC seem unlikely to be guided onto the path of contestation. The same goes for the other would-be monitoring agencies—the Democratic Parties, the national Auditor General, the Chief Prosecutor, etc. Contestation requires a balance of power among elites of the very sort that China now lacks. As Larry Diamond notes: “How would these various agencies be insulated from interference and intimidation from the

⁷⁷ The admission of widespread, albeit localized and unlinked, instability in the country has become increasingly open in recent years. See *Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu ketizu* (Study Group of the Organization Department of the Party Central Committee). *2000–2001: Zhongguo diaocha baogao: xin xingshixia renmin neibu maodun yanjiu* (China Survey Report 2000–1: Research on Social Frictions under New Conditions) (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2001).

⁷⁸ Pan Wei, “Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 34 (2003), pp. 3–43. Interestingly, Pan takes Singapore and Hong Kong as his models, apparently overlooking the fact of their universal direct suffrage, which makes them much more inclusive hegemonies than the competitive oligarchy he is espousing.

⁷⁹ Zuo Sifang, “Ke ‘minzhu’ yu ‘kexue’ yu xinzhong” (Taking ‘Democracy’ and ‘Science’ to Heart), *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekend), 8 May 2003.

⁸⁰ Michael Dowdle, “Inductive Accountability: Constitutional Exploration Outside of the Regulatory State”. Available at <www.international.ucla.edu/ccs/papers/dowdle_paper.pdf>.

Communist Party elite, many of whom they would wind up investigating and putting behind bars if they took their responsibility seriously?"⁸¹

So a voluntary shift along either axis of polyarchy seems unlikely. Goodwin's model adds another reason: China's middle-range state capacity is not enough to maintain control of the process.⁸²

Is there a third way between popular overthrow and voluntary liberalization? There is, and it has been the dominant mode of democratic transitions: elite-led extrication. In the worldwide Third Wave of democratization from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, roughly 29 of 41 transitions were of this type.⁸³ In this scenario, elites under pressure from a mobilized society and unable to govern effectively or to buy off the population calculate that their interests lie in change. Democracy can be seen as a structural means of control when the old levers of repression and co-optation no longer work. When volatile middle-class opinion suddenly rejects the anti-democratic discourse of the regime, the process of change happens quickly, leading to a skeletal democracy, usually one dominated by the former authoritarian elites. It may be the only feasible exit left for the CCP.⁸⁴

Within the Standing Committee, Zeng Qinghong is a key figure who might argue in favour of such a shift. He is a "political" person who sees contestation as necessary and good. One high-level Party exile expresses a grudging admiration for him: "If he were in the U.S., he would be a congressman, leader of the opposition party, or even President".⁸⁵ Wen Jiabao's frequent use of the term "democratic decision-making" makes him a potential ally if his scientism recedes.⁸⁶ Some younger members of the Fifth Generation, like Bo Xilai, also appear more willing to embrace politics. As so often, a political opening in authoritarian regimes depends not on principled liberals but on politically-aware self-interested members of the political elite like Zeng, Wen and Bo who see in open politics a better field for their ambitions.

We cannot make predictions about the timing of this transition, given the contingencies of authoritarian survival. What is foreseeable is that the decline of

⁸¹ Larry Diamond, "The Rule of Law as Transition to Democracy in China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 35 (2003), p. 325.

⁸² See Wang Shaoguang, "The Problems of State Weakness", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, special issue on China's Changing of the Guard (January 2003), pp. 36-42.

⁸³ This is my own calculation, which includes 8 of 10 in the USSR and Eastern Europe, 19 of 27 in the rest of the pre-1992 period of the Third Wave, and 2 of 4 since then (namely Indonesia and Tanzania but not Serbia and Cambodia).

⁸⁴ This is the scenario I outline in *China's Democratic Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁸⁵ Zong Hairen, *Disidai* (The Fourth Generation) (New York: Mirror Books, 2002), p. 200.

⁸⁶ Signs of this hope are evident in the *China Daily* editorial entitled "New Leaders Spearhead New Ideas", carried online by the *People's Daily* in August 2003. Available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200308/05/eng20030805_121723.shtml.

politics will render the transition more unsettled and the challenges of governance in a re-politicized China all the greater.

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