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Comparative Political Studies 2008 41: 259 originally published online 31

October 2007

DOI: 10.1177/0010414007308020

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Legitimacy and Institutional Change

The Case of China

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What explains the nature of institutional change in post-1989 China? Dominant theories of institutional change focus on economic-rationalist, sociopolitical, or historical causes. Yet they have trouble explaining the pattern of institutional change in China. An alternative legitimacy-based perspective is proposed here that provides a more parsimonious and general theory of institutional change for China and potentially for other cases as well.

Keywords: *legitimacy; institutional change; social values; democratization; China*

One of the central puzzles of China since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre is how the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been able to reform some aspects of state institutions while maintaining the central features of a one-party state. Explanations of this “contained institutional change” matter, because they provide insights into the likely durability of CCP rule. Why has the party’s basic governing structure survived even as institutions have been reformed, and what, if anything, might bring about its demise?

Institutional change can be defined as changes to the governing structure of a state. This term leaves open the evolutionary endpoint of such changes and the possibility that the magnitude of such changes may be as great within certain regime types as across them. There is no agreed typology of theories of institutional change, partly because most scholars work within only one tradition. One can identify, however, several of these traditions, following Thelen’s (2003) research. Economic institutionalism explains changes to institutions in light of the demands of economic interests, whether group or individual, often according to a relatively simple rational choice approach to decision making (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; North, 1990). Sociopolitical institutionalism is similar but centers more on social

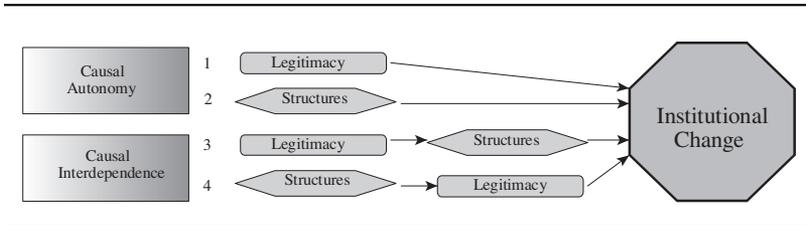
or political power than on economic interests (Bueno de Mesquita, 2003; Migdal, 2001). Historical institutionalism finds explanations in the impact of prior events, where exogenous technological change or endogenous facets of the institutions themselves trump conscious social control (Mahoney, 2001; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). These three theories—economic, sociopolitical, and historical—share several features, the most important of which is the absence of any subjective normative coherence to institutional change. It is not assumed (indeed, it is generally rejected) that institutional change is consciously endorsed or pursued by citizens as a whole, much less than it could ever be defended from a normative standpoint. Instead, their focus is on the structural conditions—economic, sociopolitical, or historical—that shape institutional change. Hence, we can use the term *structural* to describe them, keeping in mind their major differences in other respects.

The fourth school, the legitimacy-based approach, differs on this point in that it accords central explanatory power to the role of popular preferences based on the common good demands of a political community (Roland, 2004; Stimson, 2004). Legitimacy is the degree to which citizens treat the state as rightfully holding and exercising political power. It represents one strand of what might be called “idealist” theories of institutional change that center on the critical importance of ideas, norms, or values. Legitimacy is particular, in that the relevant norms or values are those developed as part of the common good aims of a political community. Legitimacy concerns public values about the rightful use of political power.

Drawing on David Easton’s (1965) descriptive model of political systems, the legitimacy-based approach conceptualizes institutions as being at the center of an endogenous system of performance (outputs), legitimacy, and feedback. Institutions are the infrastructure for generating the performance on which legitimacy is based. Maintaining legitimacy means shifting institutions to generate valued performance. When that performance falls short, pressures grow for more radical institutional change. In this sense, the legitimacy-based approach is explicit in modeling institutions endogenously, where they are both a consequence and a cause of legitimacy.¹

Some studies of institutional change seek to embrace all four perspectives: economic, sociopolitical, historical, and legitimacy based. Indeed, it is unlikely that any one perspective is ever wholly sufficient from a historical viewpoint. South Africa’s 1993–1994 democratization, for example, was driven in part by the delegitimation of the apartheid regime and demands for a more inclusive and accountable one (Boulle, 1984; Slabbert,

Figure 1
Four Variants of the Theories of Institutional Change



1992). But it also depended on the political bargaining considerations of the National Party regime (Sisk, 1995) and on the economic impact of international sanctions (Crawford & Klotz, 1999). Meanwhile, the institutions that arose had significant historical continuities with those of the apartheid era (Picard, 2005).

The relationship between the structural and legitimacy-based theories of institutional change can thus be described in terms of four variants. Structural factors and legitimacy may be causally autonomous in their effects on institutional change or they may be causally interdependent. In the latter case, either one could be the critical cause. This scheme is illustrated in Figure 1.

Both structural (Variants 2 and 4) and legitimacy-based (Variants 1 and 3) theories of institutional change can be justified deductively. From the structural perspective, the demands of legitimacy are inoperative without the means with which to act. Because those means may be only loosely connected to the demands, the critical causal factor will be the structures themselves. Przeworski (1991) argued, for example, that what matters in democratization is “not the breakdown of legitimacy but the organization of counter hegemony” (p. 28). Skocpol (1979) focused on state weakness and international pressures in explaining revolutions. Indeed, legitimacy may be driven by those structural factors themselves (Variant 4). Thelen (2003) says that “in many cases changes in power relations hold the key to creating the openings in which new scripts . . . can become more central” (p. 217).

The argument for the legitimacy-based theory of institutional change can likewise be made deductively, either in the autonomous or interdependent sense. Not only might legitimacy have autonomous effects (Variant 1) but it may also lurk in the fabric of economic, sociopolitical, or historical accounts of institutional change (Variant 3). Indeed, a close reading of many structural accounts of institutional change will find norms or beliefs

listed as parameters of the game or as part of the definition of the institutions themselves (Greif & Laitin, 2004, p. 641; North, 1981, p. 53). What is self-interested, politically feasible, or historically embedded is often a function of what is legitimate. Although the forces of legitimacy do not always bring about institutional change, institutional change is often a response to those forces, especially over the long term, on this view. In Polanyi's (1944/2001) classic study, it was the force of legitimacy, expressed as claims on the common good, which determined the rise of regulative institutions in capitalist economies (p. 159). Or to return to the South African case, the fall of apartheid was a direct result of the delegitimation of the regime but also an indirect result of how that delegitimation generated structural conditions that magnified the impact of illegitimacy (the rise of a reform faction within the National Party, or the application of economic sanctions, for example).

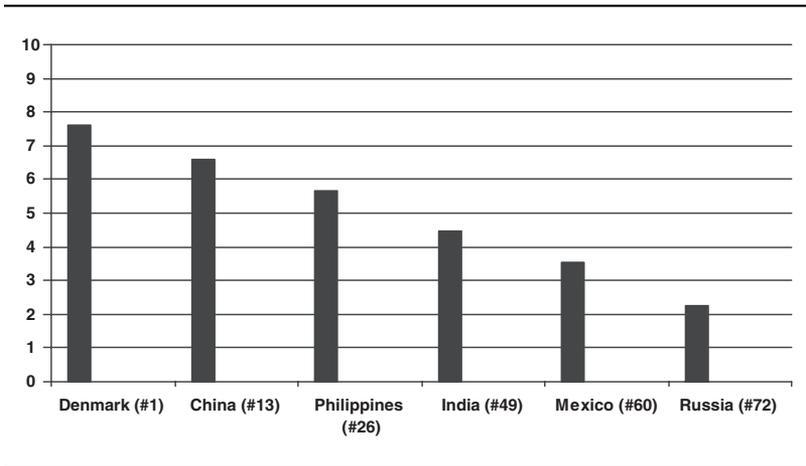
Which approach to institutional change—legitimacy-based or structural—best explains the pattern of post-1989 institutional change in China? And what does this tell us about the more general causes² of institutional change?

Measuring Legitimacy

Any consideration of the relative importance of legitimacy compared to structural accounts requires that we first measure legitimacy itself. Most cross-national comparative studies of legitimacy, or the closely related concepts of political trust or support, in the Chinese party-state find evidence of high legitimacy (J. Chen, 2004; Fewsmith, 2007; Z. Wang, 2005). In my own study (Gilley, 2006b), following the seminal work of Beetham (1991), legitimacy was specified (and measured) according to three dimensions: legality, justification, and consent. A total of nine attitudinal and behavioral indicators from five different sources were used to measure these three dimensions and to construct aggregate legitimacy scores for 72 countries for the period 1998 to 2002. China ranked 13th overall in this measure, with a normalized score on a 0 to 10 scale of 6.58 (see Figure 2).

Two cautionary points are worth noting about this high legitimacy. For one, the high legitimacy of the central state contrasts with much lower legitimacy in the local state, where participation is higher and protest much more frequent (A. Saich, 2005; F.-L. Wang, 2005). China's official blue-book on social development for 2005, for example, says that political support among rural dwellers declines from 50% for the central party-state to 25%, 5%, 2%, and 1% for the next four levels of authority (provincial, city, county, and township; Yu, 2005). Second, as an authoritarian regime whose

Figure 2
Legitimacy in 72 Countries, Selected, Late 1990s to Early 2000s
(0 to 10 Scale)



legitimacy rests mainly on a certain subjective perception of performance, preferences may be more unstable than in democratic regimes that are judged more by objective procedural criteria. Counterhegemonic discourses circle like vultures, watching to see if the state makes itself vulnerable through miscalculation or bungling. As in communist Europe and in 1989 China, opposition to the regime may appear “out of nowhere” (Kuran, 1992).

Nonetheless, all evidence points to the persistence of fairly robust levels of popular legitimacy in China. Although it is possible to be normatively or sociologically critical of the reasons for that legitimacy, its existence in China is not much in dispute. This is what distinguishes China from other politically closed regimes such as Cuba, North Korea, Myanmar, or Syria, where legitimacy is presumed to be low. As such, we should take medium to high legitimacy as the working assumption for understanding contemporary Chinese politics.

Explaining Contained Institutional Change

China has experienced significant institutional changes since 1989. On one hand, significant changes have been introduced in the ways in which political power is used: bureaucratic downsizing; party institutionalization;

major central-provincial and corporate tax reforms; bureaucratic centralization; semicompetitive elections in self-managing villages; enhanced legal institutions; the rise of the regulatory state; and most recently, the planned establishment of an autonomous National Corruption Prevention Bureau. On the other hand, there have been no changes to the CCP's constitutional monopoly of political power. We can refer to this as "contained institutional change." Which type of explanation—legitimacy based or structural—best accounts for this pattern?

At the macroscopic level, the mere simultaneity of medium to high levels of legitimacy and significant but contained institutional change weighs in favor of the notion that the party's program of institutional change has successfully responded to public preferences. As F.-L. Wang (1998) argued, the post-Mao state's emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency and state strengthening are consistent with the post-Mao public's emphasis on what Inglehart and Welzel (2005) call "modernization" values, which are empirically strong in contemporary China: Economic development and national defense were each cited as the most important national task by 35% of respondents in China to the 2001 World Values Survey, compared to just 5% who cited political participation.³

At the microscopic level, various studies show how the party has responded to social demands for more efficient rule at the local level. In their cross-province study of the organization and administration of population control policies, for example, Y. Huang and Yang (2002) found that the shift to more professionalized and noncoercive institutions was driven by public demands: "Concerned about the legitimacy problem, there was a perceived political need to shift the contentious issue from the political arena to the administrative 'neutral' zone" (p. 30). Likewise, the introduction of village elections in 1989, even amidst the grim structural conditions of post-Tiananmen China, was motivated by what Kelliher (1997) calls "a political crisis in the countryside." Village elections responded to demands for accountable village rule and thus resolved the legitimacy crisis, because in popular perceptions, elected leaders, "unlike their [unelected] predecessors . . . dedicate themselves solely to the public good" (p. 69). The rapid development of China's legal system has likewise responded to popular demands for more rational and impartial rule (Liebman, 2006).

Purely structural explanations (Variant 2) of such changes—that they respond to the imperatives of privileged economic groups, particularistic social forces, or path-dependent processes—are difficult to sustain in light of evidence of their legitimacy across all socioeconomic groups. In survey evidence, individual-level expressions of legitimacy beliefs in the national

state are weakly or negatively correlated with individual income levels. The poor are as likely to express support for the regime as are the better off.⁴

Structural accounts might still be rescued if legitimacy beliefs are themselves a result of these structures of power (i.e., Variant 4). Frequent use of the term *co-optation* to refer to the support of the regime by citizens implies some form of unwilling or unconscious agreement. Yet X. Chen and Shi (2001), using data from 1993-1994, found a negative correlation between media consumption and political support. Revisiting the question using 1999 data, Tang (2005) finds a more mixed picture: Regime support is now positively correlated to media exposure, but so are a host of values that the current regime does not espouse: pro-Western sentiments, liberal values, and political activism. Tang's conclusion is that media controls have only a partial impact on values, which continue to liberalize, and the ability of the state to remain legitimate depends on whether it responds to those changing values (p. 98). Nationalism, for instance, is increasingly out of the control of the party, suggesting that it is more autonomous than that of regime structures (Gries, 2004).

From this perspective, China's people do not support the regime because they have been co-opted by the state (Variant 4). Rather, they have been co-opted by the state because they believe in its legitimacy (Variant 3). Business owners join or ally themselves with the party because they share its developmental ethos (Dickson, 2006; H. Li, Meng, & Zhang, 2006). Co-optation in authoritarian regimes usually declines once subjective legitimacy beliefs begin to change (M. H. Huang & Koo, 1997). Structural conditions cannot explain the pervasive and durable sense of regime legitimacy among most Chinese people.

Nathan (2006), seeking to strike a balance, claims that regime resilience is driven by both relatively autonomous forms of public support (legitimacy) and by repression. But we can never know how important the latter is until the former changes. If the regime is legitimate, then the importance of repression can never be known. The moment public attitudes shift, seemingly limitless repressive capacity may dissolve into thin air, as it did at Checkpoint Charlie on November 9, 1989.

Explaining Uncontained Institutional Change

The topography of uncontained institutional change can likewise be considered with respect to competing legitimacy-based and structural explanations.

As a general descriptive statement, there has been very little uncontained institutional change in post-1989 China. From the structural perspective, this is because of the many obstacles to such change. These include, *inter alia*, co-opted business and middle classes, repressed labor organizations, rigged village elections, political institutionalization (especially at the elite level), an effectively controlled media and Internet, an overregulated civil society, and an economic race to the bottom that pits regions and classes against one another. Tsai and Gallagher both argue that the particularities of capitalism in China have become a structural constraint to democracy: “capitalism without democracy” (Tsai, 2007) or “contagious capitalism” (Gallagher, 2005). Christiansen (1994) says that if such “structural constraints on democratization” were transformed, “China could perhaps experience a transition towards a representative democracy” (p. 170).

By contrast, legitimacy-based variants would argue that these structural conditions are either irrelevant (Variant 1) or are themselves more the product of legitimacy than its cause (Variant 3). In the case of communist Europe, for example, Szelenyi and Szelenyi (1994) argued that delegitimation acted both autonomously through intellectual dissent and social movements and interdependently by creating the conditions within the regimes and economies that undermined communist rule (pp. 218-219). To take Gallagher’s (2002) example of China, the repressed private sector that she saw in 2002 as critical to holding democracy in check has since blossomed, with 2.5 million firms accounting for nearly half of state corporate tax revenues. Structural accounts of values would predict that societal resistance would be on the rise; yet it is not. In that sense, China’s reform strategy—drawing in foreign investment and relying on low-wage labor—may have been a response to rather than a cause of legitimacy (Variant 3). As Zheng (2003) argues, the lack of demand for more radical institutional changes reflects not the imposition of structural constraints on autonomous thought but rather the public preferences of China’s citizens.

One way to test these rival explanations is to consider those few instances where there has been uncontained institutional change. Perhaps the only successful example of this in the post-1989 period has been the holding of rogue elections for township governments. Townships, of which there are 38,000 in China with an average population of 26,000 people, are the lowest of the four levels of the state, above the theoretically autonomous villages. Their governments are chosen by township legislatures (“people’s congresses”) that are generally appointed by township party committees. Since 1999, at least two dozen illegal popular elections have been held for township governments, and many have been repeated

since. From the legitimacy-based perspective, such elections can be explained as the result of a legitimacy crisis that cannot be solved in any other way. From the structural perspective, the elections result from a shift in the balance of structural forces in favor of them.

Again, the simultaneity of legitimacy and institutional change (in this case, low legitimacy and uncontained institutional change) is suggestive of a legitimacy-based explanation: six of the eight provinces in which direct township elections have taken place—Henan, Hubei, Shanxi, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Sichuan—are poor inland areas where “legitimacy crisis” (*hefaxing weiji*) at the local level has been widely noted (L. Li, 2007; Sun, 2006). Although township cadres are generally strongly opposed to such elections because of the lack of payoffs they reap, they or their superiors at the county level have moved to the side of elections because of the far worse consequences of an ongoing legitimacy crisis (Variant 3; L. Li, 2007). The peasant leaders pushing for the elections, meanwhile, have little or nothing to gain, except the esteem they reap as representatives of the common good (Yu, 2006). The centrality of legitimacy to similarly radical changes in Latin America was highlighted by Grindle (2000) in her study of “audacious reforms” by entrenched and antidemocratic elites: direct elections for governors and mayors in Venezuela, radical municipalization in Bolivia, and the direct election of the mayor of Buenos Aires in Argentina.

A comparison of two of the best-known township elections in China is instructive. Whereas the Dapeng experiment in wealthy Guangdong province of 1999 was motivated by elite desires to be seen as a reform leader nationally and held in an area with no evident legitimacy crisis (consistent with structural explanations), the Buyun experiment in poor Sichuan in 1998 was motivated by a genuine legitimacy crisis brought on by corruption and a failed stone quarry project in the district of Shizhong in which the township sits (consistent with legitimacy-based explanations; F. Li, 2000; L. Li, 2002). The Buyun experiment was repeated (in modified form) in 2001 and again in 2006, whereas the Dapeng experiment was halted. Popular legitimacy crisis was a powerful impetus to durable uncontained institutional change in Buyun, whereas elite careerism in the absence of popular pressures in Dapeng was not.

Similarly, the simultaneous election of 7 of the 142 township heads in poverty-stricken and mountainous Honghe prefecture of Yunnan province (near the Vietnam border) in 2004 by 103,000 voters—the biggest single experiment in township elections to date—is ascribed by Honghe Party School professor An (2006) to the deep legitimacy crisis facing the townships

as a result of fiscal crisis and uneasy relationships with elected village governments. T. Saich and Yang (2003) argue that renegade township elections are driven by an attempt “to broaden participation to enhance legitimacy” in the face of frail budgets and rising corruption. Fewsmith (2004) ascribes the elections to “a palpable need to enhance the legitimacy of local officials” (p. 1).

If legitimacy crisis explains township elections, then the lack of a more general move toward township elections must be because of a general sentiment against them; legitimacy crisis is not so deep in most places that it makes uncontained institutional changes attractive. Indeed, this is what survey evidence shows. In three surveys carried out in Jiangsu and Jiangxi provinces from 1998 to 2000, Jiangxi Administrative College scholar Xiao (2003) found that the majority of villagers, like cadres, believed that such elections were premature or inappropriate. The spread of township elections, then, is dependent on the evolution of public sentiments, not the evolution of structural conditions. As Xiao concludes: “Public opinion will provide the necessary basis and momentum for political development” (p. 64).

The other key instance of uncontained institutional change in the post-Tiananmen period—this one a failure—was the establishment of the China Democracy Party in 1998-1999. Set up as a formal opposition party, the CDP boasted 29 nationwide branches and 83 leaders by March 1999. On the Przeworskian (2004) view of counter-hegemonies, the CDP should have ushered in regime-changing institutional change. Instead, it crumpled after just a few arrests once the CCP’s tolerance ended. As the sympathetic sister of one of the CDP leaders noted of its organizers: “They failed to take the measure of the national mood” (Zha, 2007, p. 54). Without a legitimacy crisis, counter-hegemonies fall flat. In her study of China’s beleaguered democracy activists, Goldman (2005) similarly notes that they “will need much more support from Chinese society than they had in the last two decades of the twentieth century” to have any impact (p. 234). If so, then legitimacy grounded in public opinion, not repression grounded in structural considerations, is the key explanation for the failure of an opposition movement.

To the extent that one can generalize about the causes of both contained and uncontained institutional change in the post-1989 period, then, legitimacy provides a better explanation than structural accounts. Through contained institutional changes, the CCP has been able to generate the outputs that create sufficient legitimacy to forestall the emergence of demands for changes to the one-party rule. Where it has failed, uncontained institutional change has often resulted. Perry (2007) argues that “neither attitude surveys

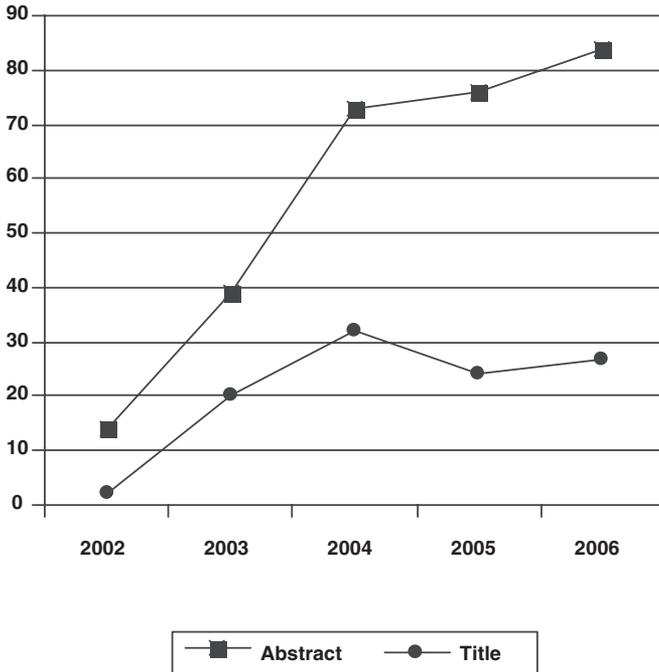
of enterprising business people nor interviews with restive workers are likely to shed as much light on the likelihood of regime change as a sober assessment of the techniques of rule perfected by the Chinese communist state” (pp. 8-9). In contrast, the argument here is that it is precisely the views of citizens that are critical, and it is those views on which the successes of the CCP’s “techniques of rule” depend. The CCP cannot create legitimacy out of mere manipulation but must perform well and keep adapting institutions to this end. For this reason, legitimacy retains its critical causal status in spite of its endogenous relationship to institutions themselves.

The Party’s New Focus on Legitimacy

The party itself is well aware of its dependence on popular legitimacy. In the post-Tiananmen period, the CCP has gradually repositioned itself as a “governing party” responding to social demands instead of a “ruling party” reshaping social demands. Former party general secretary Jiang Zemin’s dramatic rewardrobing of the CCP from a transformative party representing the proletariat into a populist party representing “the fundamental interests of the vast majority of the Chinese people” in his Theory of the Three Represents (announced in 2001 and incorporated into the Party constitution in 2002) reflects the CCP’s recognition that its survival today depends mainly on whether it is legitimate. When Khrushchev declared that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) would become a “party of all the people” in 1961, it was stridently denounced by the CCP as revisionist, “a massive backward step” in the words of the official critique (*People’s Daily*, 1964). Forty years later, theorists in China admit that this is exactly what the CCP has done with the Three Represents (He, Huang, & Wu, 2006). In 2004, the CCP acknowledged for the first time that the 1949 revolution no longer served as a durable basis of legitimacy, an admission widely cited in current discussions about legitimization strategies: “The CCP’s ruling status is by no means a natural result of the Party’s founding, and will not remain forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it,” reads the preamble to a party decision on governing capacity (*People’s Daily*, 2004). A leading theorist, writing in the journal of the Central Party School in Beijing, argues that the historical legitimacy of the CCP “is already exhausted” (Zhu, 2005, p. 46).

Under current CCP general secretary Hu Jintao, the concern with legitimacy has been heightened further, as evidenced by the espousal of a theory of “three for the peoples” (*san wei min*) and his clear emphasis on

Figure 3
Articles About Legitimacy in 36 Party School Journals, 2002-2006
(5-Year Period)



Note: The author's calculations are based on the China Academic Journals Database (only journals with full coverage, abstracts, and titles in Chinese and the same frequency for the entire period and substantive subject on political legitimacy in China). Total number of journals = 36. The journals list is available on request.

the populist aspects of the Three Represents (Holbig, 2006, p. 24; Lam, 2006, pp. 67-68). "Legitimacy . . . is the key element reflecting the governance capacity of the ruling party as well as an important factor for the party to hold a stable ruling position," notes one academic paper (Jie, 2006, p. 27). As evidence of this new concern, party school journals since 2002 have been increasingly replete with articles on the question of legitimacy (see Figure 3).

Chinese scholars and cadres harbor no illusions that, in the face of a national legitimacy crisis, they could prevent uncontained institutional change

any more than could the CPSU. The new emphasis is on preventing the emergence of such a crisis in the first place. In reviewing the lessons of the collapse of the Soviet Union, CCP strategists increasingly point not to the dangers of releasing repressive controls but to the dangers of relying on them in the first place (Hao & Ni, 2006; Liu, 2006; Sui & Han, 2006; Zhou & Hao, 2006). “The deep reason for the disintegration of the Soviet Union lies in the exhaustion of political legitimacy,” write Lu and Wei (2005, p. 27). Similarly, the initial prescriptions taken from the “color revolutions” in Georgia, the Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan—the clamp down on civil society and elections—have evolved into new lessons about the centrality of legitimacy to the CCP’s survival: “If the regime lacks legitimacy, people will either become alienated or confrontational. In the [color revolutions], the people chose the latter, allowing us to draw a lesson from the bloodshed that we have seen repeated by history many times before” (Ru & Ren, 2006, p. 35).

Having accepted that its legitimacy is no longer historically given, the CCP is understandably anxious to explore the basis on which its legitimacy might be upheld. A single-party state that “comes to terms with the society it governs,” as Huntington (1968) noted 40 years ago, is in constant danger of being “deprived of a *raison d’être*” (p. 426). This brings us to threats to legitimacy itself.

Theories of Legitimacy Crisis

If legitimacy is the critical explanation of the post-Tiananmen contained institutional change in China, then how might this change? Analysts of China’s legitimacy have variously posited six main sources of post-1989 legitimacy of the state: (a) economic growth and development, (b) stability and governance, (c) political and civil rights, (d) international prestige and nationalism, (e) cultural or historical dispositions to trust the national state, and (f) social, cultural, and economic rights. In my own cross-national analysis of the same 72 countries used to measure legitimacy (Gilley, 2006a), objective national-level indicators of (a), (b), and (c) were found to be robust predictors of state legitimacy, whereas the others were not. However, China was a large outlier from the general pattern (the second biggest of eight outlier states), enjoying legitimacy roughly 50% higher than would be predicted by its performance on these three dimensions.

China’s huge “legitimacy premium” suggests that (d), (e), and (f) may be important sources of legitimacy and that regime propaganda may exert some influence on legitimacy evaluations (Variant 4). Yet given that many

outside observers with full information and multiple university degrees share the same high evaluations of the Chinese state (Peerenboom, 2007), those evaluations cannot be simply dismissed as the result of regime propaganda or false consciousness. Z. Wang (2005) and Shi (in press) both argue that, given their country's developmental stage, China's citizens are simply displaying the well-known preference for growth over democracy.

Legitimacy can decline in two ways. One is a performance crisis. Discussions of regime failure in the Soviet Union or communist Eastern Europe, for instance, tended to focus mainly on performance failure (Fish, 1995; Goldman, 1983; Holmes, 1993). In China's case, performance failure would mean a slowdown of growth, a rapid deterioration of stability or governance, or some form of national disgrace. Yet the consensus view at present is that growth will not slow for several decades, whereas middling levels of governance and stability will be assured through continued "contained" institutional changes. The party has also proven agile in maintaining its nationalistic image through several crises. If so, then the analysis of China must depart from that of the Soviet Union. Unlike the CPSU, the CCP has shown since 1989 that it can adapt sufficiently to avoid performance failure.

A second source of legitimacy crisis is value change. Here, the regime continues chugging along one train line only to look back and discover that the passenger cars have been decoupled. Legitimacy crisis that results from value change was likened to an "identity crisis" by Habermas (1975, p. 46), because what comes into question are the basic standards against which the regime has always measured itself. On some accounts, value change better explains the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe than performance failure does (di Palma, 1991; Mason, 1985). Inglehart has found a close correspondence between value shifts and consequent institutional change, first from weak traditional regimes to strong authoritarian regimes (such as today's China), and then from strong authoritarian regimes to democratic regimes (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). What is important is whether authoritarian regimes respond preemptively to such shifts (as in Taiwan) or belatedly to such shifts (as in the Philippines).

Evidence of dramatic value change in China has been widely noted in several studies (Chu, in press; Inkeles, 1998). "If socioeconomic development continues at the current pace (as it shows every sign of doing), mass emphasis on self-expression will become even more widespread, and will probably also begin to permeate the military and the younger party elites," argue Inglehart and Welzel (2005, p. 190). Z. Wang (2005) argues that "the State may fall short of public expectations relatively soon" (p. 168), whereas Guo (2006) believes that "bureaucratic technocracy" will eventually fail in

the face of value shift. As Lewin (1988) argued presciently about Russian society and the CPSU, Chinese society is slowly outgrowing the CCP.

Internal party discourses are closely attuned to this value change. By far, the greatest number of recent articles in party school (*dang xiao*) journals on the question of legitimacy concern not attempts to mold values but attempts to keep up with them: "Any political party that wants to constantly keep its legitimacy in wielding state power must adapt itself to the changes of the times," write Xu and Yang (2005, p. 41). Such writings evince a deep concern with the possibility, indeed the apparent fact, that development, revolutionary heritage, or nationalism may wear thin as sources of legitimacy in the future. Most argue that the shift to postmodernization values is already happening and that the urgency with which the party must transform itself is great: "Since the mid-1990s, China's economy has been growing rapidly and yet China faces a crisis of political legitimacy. . . . So the foundation of political legitimacy should change gradually with changes in society," writes Yue (2005, p. 41). A scholar of the Central Party School in Beijing similarly argues that "fair distribution, social justice, and citizen rights and freedoms . . . may all rise to challenge economic issues as the main demands of citizens," pointing to the collapse of developmental dictatorships in South Korea and Southeast Asia as evidence. (Y. Li, 2004, p. 35)

The Institutional Consequences of Legitimacy Crisis

If current performance is unlikely to sustain legitimacy because of value change, then legitimacy crisis is either emerging or prospectual. A persistent legitimacy crisis imposes ongoing costs on the effectiveness of any regime. When lacking legitimacy, public compliance with laws and norms of public conduct declines. Open protest and subversion of the state spreads. Appeals to the common good necessary to enact legislation that imposes costs on certain groups become impossible. In short, legitimacy crisis leads to a deterioration of the state. Nothing is more damaging to the long-term durability of a regime or state than a loss of moral authority (Chesterman, Ignatieff, & Thakur, 2005; Jackman, 1993).

States may respond to legitimacy crisis in three main ways: (a) They may replace legitimacy with a greater emphasis on coercion or inducements for particular groups, thus moving from a common good basis of rule to a clientelistic basis; (b) they may reconfigure the basis of legitimacy, attempting either to reassert the old value orientations that support current performance or to define new value orientations with which the regime is more likely to be congruent; or (c) they may improve their performance consistent

with new social demands. These three pathways—replace, reconfigure, respond—lead to three very different predictions about institutional change.

Replacement usually prefigures the deterioration of the regime, because it is such a costly and risky stratagem. In Burma, the replacement of legitimacy with coercion from the suppression of prodemocracy protests in 1988 prefigured a long and costly battle between state and society whose tragic end is yet to be seen (Viernes, 2007). The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe followed the same path after losing a referendum on political and economic reforms in 2000. A move from legitimacy-based compliance and state effectiveness to coercive or clientelistic compliance would have dire consequences for China. Faced with an impending legitimacy crisis, the party leadership could deny the moral validity of that crisis, arguing as it did in 1989 that China's people were misled in their calls for political change. Assured of the goodness of its rule, the party could move away from the consent-based model of political organization to a coercive-clientelistic one. From 1989 to early 1992, this is the model that China adopted. The emphasis was mainly on coercion: 127,000 party members were expelled and another 166,000 were punished (Lam, 1995, p. 156; 120,000 had been expelled after the 1986 student movement [Miles, 1996, p. 27]), while hundreds of thousands of students were sent to factories to *duanlian* (self-temper). Open dissent ceased altogether. Economic growth slowed. The costs of this approach were so dire that patriarch Deng Xiaoping, worried that the party would not last, opted for a new approach. Touring central and southern China in early 1992, Deng announced a new social contract: massive economic liberalization in return for political quiescence. The *Nanxun* (Southern Inspection Tour) social contract became the basis for the subsequent legitimacy miracle of the CCP. The CCP, now deeply schooled in the centrality of legitimacy to its rule, is unlikely to pursue this path again and unlikely to succeed even if it tried.

Reconfiguration is just as difficult but potentially more enduring. One way to do this is to arrest the shift from modernist values (to reassert the importance of growth, stability, and nationalism above all). Scholars in this regard have often discussed the possibility of a diversionary war on Taiwan—like Argentinean Lieutenant General Leopoldo Galtieri's attack on the Falkland Islands in 1982. However, Morgan and Anderson (1999) argue that diversionary force is most likely when overall support for the regime or government is high and support for particular parties or leaders is low. China's 1995-1996 missile tests conducted around the shores of Taiwan fit this model admirably: System support and nationalism was high, but Jiang Zemin's consolidation of his power in the twilight days of Deng

was troubled (Lam, 1999, pp. 172-187; Nathan & Gilley, 2003, pp. 172-181). Similarly, the passage of a war-threatening Anti-Secession Law by Beijing in 2005, a year after Hu Jintao's assumption of the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, fits the model's predictions nicely. But in a situation in which system legitimacy is low or falling, a diversionary war becomes less likely. The frequently voiced fears of an attack on Taiwan if the CCP faced a legitimacy crisis seem unfounded.

A more likely possibility is the articulation of an alternative modernity that seeks to directly challenge the democratic ideal with a replacement deemed more suitable to Chinese conditions (and the CCP). Current discourse both inside and outside of China is replete with new proposals for legitimate new forms of political organization that are not democratic. These can be generally divided into theories of the left (C. Lin, 2006; Shih, 2000)—emphasizing socioeconomic equality and participatory politics—and those of the right (Kang, 2006; Pan, 2003)—emphasizing economic nationalism and elite rule. Both tend to reject electoral democracy as unsuitable—which is to say illegitimate—in the Chinese context. Whether some such alternative modernity could command the support of China's people must remain open to question. The experiences of other countries with alternatives are not encouraging, and the shift to electoral legitimation at local levels in China suggests that China will be no exception.

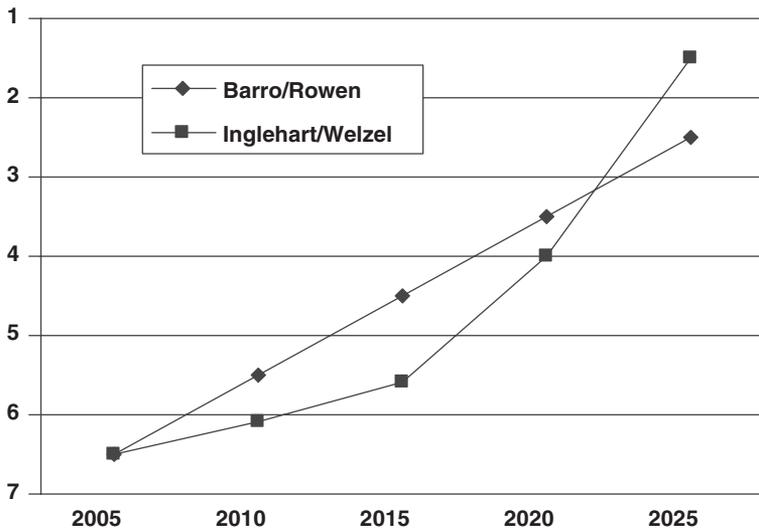
Response is thus the third option. Here, the party responds to legitimacy crisis by improving its performance on the relevant factor: democracy and its associated civil rights. This is consistent with a more general legitimacy-centered theory of democratization that could be stated simply, to paraphrase Moore, as “no legitimacy crisis, no democratization” (Burnell, 2006; Welzel, 2006). Recalling Figure 1 or the South African case, legitimacy here acts directly through political mechanisms of social responsiveness and indirectly by generating structures of opposition and regime weakness.⁵ Given that demands for democracy are limited in China at present, it should come as no surprise that “democracy on the installment plan” has worked admirably for the regime. China has not yet reached the income level at which transition would be expected. In my own study of cross-national sources of legitimacy cited above, large deviations from the regression line became nearly impossible above about \$10,000 GDP per capita (purchasing power parity, 2002 dollars), meaning that being a democracy was nearly a necessity above this level. China will likely enter this zone around the year 2020. From this perspective, China is not an outlier from the modernization paradigm but merely at an earlier stage of it. In other words, China is still on schedule for democratization driven by value change-induced legitimacy crisis (Zheng, 2003).

On this theory, China has been moving toward democratic transition in the post-1989 era through a liberalization phase. Interpreted thus, the period since 1989 has been one of “creeping democratization” (Pei, 1995) or a growing “public policy convergence” (Groth, 2005) between China and established democracies. Village elections, a Legislation Law of 2000 giving the people’s congresses greater legislative and review powers, recent laws protecting private property and human rights, and the party’s transformation into a populist party—all suggest a very predictable slide towards democracy. The mistake is to believe, as many did of the USSR and Yugoslavia (Denitch, 1976; White, 1986), that these liberalization tactics will slake the democratic thirst for any sustained period in the face of value change. Zweig (2002) argues that democratic institutions will be needed to satisfy growing demands for the articulation of new interests (Zweig, 2002). Inglehart and Welzel (2005) predict that “China will make a transition to a liberal democracy within the next two decades” (p. 191).

Two models can be used to predict the trajectory of rising social demands for democracy in China (Figure 4). Using the Barro (1999) model in which democracy is a lagged variable of socioeconomic change (especially education and income levels), Rowen (2007) has predicted a linear rise in democracy demands. Similarly, World Values Survey data from 2001 can be used to impute another series, this one premised on the close correlations between GDP per capita and postmodernization values ($r = .86$) and between postmodernization values and democracy ($r = .75$).⁶

These curves do not predict the actual trajectory of institutional change of course. The relationship between social demands and institutional supply is an imperfect one. Democratization in China is sure to be disjunctive and lagged, and may even involve several backward steps, as it has in most places. Public opinion can be ignored or even massaged in the short term. Nonetheless, the more that supply departs from this demand, the more likely it will be a democratic transition, assuming that neither the replacement nor the reconfiguration options proves feasible. That is why critical causal status must remain with legitimacy rather than with structural factors that may delay or accelerate democratic transition. Strong demands for democracy in Southeast and East Asia have been empirically the best predictors of democratic breakthroughs (Dalton & Shin, 2006; Lee, 2002). China-watching, on this view, is best seen through the “transitions paradigm” (Nodia, 2002) insofar as it points us to the most relevant factors influencing institutional change—namely, how long the regime can refuse a citizenry with growing democratic aspirations.

Figure 4
Predicted Society-Congruent Democracy Levels
(Freedom House Combine Average Rating, 7 to 1)



Conclusion

This article builds on an emergent theory of legitimacy-centered institutional change. By showing how the legitimacy-centered approach might better fit evidence from China than structural theories, it raises new questions about the forces driving and preventing institutional change in China and elsewhere. It argues that legitimacy—understood both as a relatively autonomous factor and as an agent shaping economic, sociopolitical, and historical structures—is a more parsimonious and general explanation of institutional stasis and change in contemporary China. From this perspective, regime survival in China is dependent on a combination of authoritarian-supporting modernist values and legitimacy-enhancing “contained” institutional changes. As those values change and as the legitimating limits of contained institutional change are reached, pressures for democratization will grow. Given that the party has committed itself to remaining legitimate and that the feasibility of nondemocratic alternative modernities is questionable, the

supply of democracy should respond accordingly. To borrow Clark's (2005) apt metaphor, legitimacy will be both the game keeper and the poacher of CCP rule (p. 21).

Of course, there is always a danger of seeing too much ordered regularity in any purely structural or ideational account of institutional change. As Lieberman (2002) argued, institutional change is usually a result of some form of disorder within ideas or structural structures. I have sought to avoid that pitfall in this account by pointing out how legitimacy may either support or challenge contained institutional change in China, and how democratization, if and when it comes, will depend on structural factors as well as ideas. But the source of those tensions, or the lack thereof, is the ideas themselves. As such, legitimacy remains the most convincing explanation of regime survival and possible regime change in post-Tiananmen China.

Although the concept of legitimacy has disappeared from allegedly more "hard" political science, this account implies that it needs to be brought back into serious political analysis. Beyond China, legitimacy has been invoked by scholars to explain institutional change in postcommunist Europe (Sil & Chen, 2004), Latin America (Armijo & Faucher, 2002), Asia (Flanagan & Lee, 2000), and Africa (Kieh, 2007). Taking ideas and ideals seriously means taking legitimacy seriously as the critical link between what institutions do and how they are changed. Bringing legitimacy back into political analysis would afford a wider view of both the durability and substantive direction of institutional change.

Notes

1. Przeworski (2004) has noted that economic institutional change theories unintentionally contain endogeneity—thus my attention to the explicit endogeneity of the legitimacy-based approach.

2. I am concerned here mainly with critical causes rather than mechanisms of institutional change. Y.-M. Lin (2001) and Tsai (2006) have both provided studies of the mechanisms of institutional change (*how*) in China that leave open the question of causes (*why*).

3. World Values Survey, 2001, Question E001. Available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

4. World Values Survey 2001, Question E110, by self-reported income group. Available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org. See also P. Li, Zhang, Zhao, & Liang, 2005; Z. Wang, 2005.

5. Kalyvas (1999) argues that delegitimation was only a correlate, not a cause of regime breakdowns in communist Europe. However, his evidence for this is that most surveys in the 1980s showed medium to high levels legitimacy (which only shows the importance of measuring legitimacy properly) and that there was no organized opposition in most countries (which is a separate issue from legitimacy). Moreover, his own avowedly structuralist account is replete with references to the background role of legitimacy (Variant 3 in the schema here; pp. 331, 334, 338).

6. This is taken from Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, pp. 150-151, Tables 7-1, 7-2. This is assuming a continued growth of 8% per annum in GDP per capita and using China's predicted 2005 position (Inglehart & Welzel, p. 90, Figure 3-2) on self-expression values as starting point. By 2025, China's 2000 prices purchasing power parity GDP per capita is estimated to rise to \$26,845. This puts China in the cluster of countries that included Israel and Spain in 2002 whose self-expression value scores (the share of the population emphasizing such values) was roughly 42%. From this, we can derive a predicted democracy score of 1.5 on the Freedom House Scale. I draw a curvilinear function consistent with the general finding that self-expression values change only slowly at first while countries are experiencing rapid industrialization.

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