

Book Reviews

China's Quest for Political Legitimacy: The New Equity Enhancing Politics

BAOGANG GUO

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010

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In the crowded field of books studying contemporary China, it takes a bold writer to state, as Baogang Guo does in his study of how the Communist Party of China (CPC) articulates the legitimacy of its right to rule and how it exercises this right, that “this book breaks new grounds in several respects.” He goes on to say that the discoveries in the book “will be an important contribution to the study of Chinese politics.” These are brave claims, best left to others. Professor Guo’s thesis is straightforward enough: that the key basis of the CPC’s claim to legitimacy rests on a shift in the last three decades from an efficiency seeking policy, towards one now focussing on equity outcomes. This lies at the heart of the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao language of “harmonious society” and “scientific development,” the two key contributions that they have made to Party thinking which were enshrined in the constitution at the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

It is true, as Guo states, that in the last decade, after successfully implementing and deepening policies based on encouraging economic growth, the central and provincial levels of the Chinese government have been mandated with promoting growth strategies that deal with the inequality that has arisen since 1978. While productivity in many areas of the economy has been unleashed, and many people have been lifted out of poverty during this process, inequality in Chinese society, by almost every measure, has increased. In his chapter on healthcare, Guo points out that while the old socialist universal healthcare system, maintained from 1949 to 1978, was bad, it was universally bad. Since the 1980s, through a series of reforms, a system has been set in place which has heavily favoured urban residents, and delivered excellent services to a tiny minority, while leaving many rural areas sparsely covered, or in some cases not covered at all.

That the party elite might have a different world view, as they shift from being the generation of technocrats who rose to power under Deng Xiaoping to a new group consisting more of lawyers, social scientists and humanities graduates, has been commented on widely. But Guo’s categories are very broad. The former leaders may well, as he states, have been driven by efficiency targets (it would have been odd had they not); that they are now moving beyond these to equity targets is true, but perhaps trivially so. It might be easier to see the Party now dealing with all the complex challenges of governing a semi-modernized, semi-industrialized economy and society, one undergoing very rapid reforms, which fits no framework easily, and which is trying to wrestle with governance challenges that are no longer simply about pumping out GDP growth. Efficiency, is, in fact, still important to this leadership, for which witness the tight targets set for carbon emissions, energy, and growth set out in the 12th Five-Year Programme which started this year.

It is also true that there has been increasing talk of how to deal with social-political reforms beyond economic ones, particularly since 2004, when it was laid out formally at a Plenum of the Central Committee. Guo is right in showing that the CPC is not attracted to models which jeopardize its monopoly on power, largely because the current elite believe that this maintains stability, without which China may risk

collapsing into the disunity it experienced in the past. The viability of this collapse is another matter, with plenty of critics regarding this frequently announced fear as merely an excuse to prevent diversification of the decision-making elite and creation of a more equitable political decision-making system.

There is much that is interesting in the detail of Guo's chapters on labour relations in China, the role of environmental protection and the structures that have been put in place to legislate in this area, and attempts in the last decade to deal with contentious issues in Shenzhen, one of the wealthiest and perhaps politically most advanced areas in contemporary China. Whether this proves the central thesis that we are seeing a move into an age where it is all about "the politics of equity replacing the politics of efficiency" is another matter, and these chapters on discrete policy areas could have been more closely related to this central thesis. Guo could also have given stronger recognition for the fact that, for all the CPC leadership's rhetoric about building a more just, balanced society, the bottom line at least in 2011 is that China is either as, or more, unequal than in 2002 when Wen and Hu came to power. Their highly aspirational language, therefore, remains just that – a hope, about which their policy responses have been very limited in their effectiveness. Perhaps this is what lies behind Wen Jiabao's complaints in 2010 and 2011 that political reform was increasingly important and needed to become a central focus of government and party policy.

Guo makes some contentious statements during the course of the book. In his sketch of leadership generations in the last 60 years, he states that "Deng Xiaoping masterminded the downfall of all these youthful leaders," referring to Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang and Hua Guofeng. But the circumstances around each of these cases are very different, and to say that Deng deliberately manoeuvred their separate demises is wrong. Events which no one could have anticipated played the major role here. Elsewhere he states that "Internally foreign trade union groups have campaigned for years to press China to improve its human rights protection, including labour rights. Certainly these gestures are not altruistic in nature; they are motivated mainly by their own self-interest, namely to protect their own job markets from Chinese competition" (p. 149). Even if valid, this is only half true. There were also many sincere attempts to create worker solidarity between those inside and outside China, and it would have been wiser to at least acknowledge this dimension. This is indicative of a fault of the book as a whole, for while it contains interesting details, it suffers from superficiality and an inability of the author to more robustly challenge their assumptions. The political legitimacy of the CPC remains a hugely important topic; a book that really hits the issues head on needs to be written, but this, while making some useful contributions, is not it.

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Beyond the Middle Kingdom: Comparative Perspectives on China's Capitalist Transformation

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This edited volume is motivated by an admirable and important goal: to bring studies of Chinese politics and political economy more squarely into the comparative politics subfield of political science. Written by leading scholars, the book moves beyond the