

The End of the CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism? A Tripartite Assessment of Shifting Power in China*

Cheng Li†

Abstract

This essay challenges the widely held view of the CCP's purported "resilient authoritarianism," which asserts that China's one-party political system is able to enhance the state capacity to govern effectively through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. An analysis of the recent and still unfolding Bo Xilai crisis reveals the flaws in China's political system, including nepotism and patron–client ties in the selection of leaders, rampant corruption, the growing oligarchic power of state-owned enterprises, elites' contempt for the law and the potential failure to broker deals between competing factions in the Party leadership. The essay argues that the CCP's "authoritarian resilience" is a stagnant system, both conceptually and empirically, because it resists much-needed democratic changes in the country. The problems of the resilient authoritarianism thesis is traceable to the monolithic conceptualizing of China – the failure to appreciate seemingly paradoxical transformative trends in the country, which this essay characterizes as three paralleled developments, namely, 1) weak leaders, strong factions; 2) weak government, strong interest groups; and 3) weak Party, strong country. One should not confuse China's national resilience (in terms of the emerging middle class, new interest group politics, and dynamic society) with the CCP's capacity and legitimacy to rule the country. The essay concludes that if the CCP intends to regain the public's confidence and avoid a bottom-up revolution, it must abandon the notion of "authoritarian resilience" and embrace a systematic democratic transition with bold steps towards intra-Party elections, judicial independence and a gradual opening of the mainstream media.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; resilient authoritarianism; factional politics; intra-Party democracy; leadership transition; corruption; fifth generation

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† Brookings. Email: cli@brookings.edu

If there is one recurring mistake that the international community makes when analysing present-day China, it is to describe the world's most populous and rapidly changing country in monolithic terms. Many commentators fail to draw a distinction between China's ruling elite and Chinese society when they assess the current status and future trajectory of Chinese politics.¹ Given that China has become increasingly pluralistic, with the arrival of many new socio-political players and an increasingly complicated decision-making process, inaccurate generalizations are more problematic today than ever before.

Over the past decade, overseas China analysts have tended to characterize the Chinese authoritarian political system as “resilient” and “strong.”² According to their logic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seems to have found a sustainable way to maintain its rule over its fast-growing economy. In the view of these foreign observers, China's increasing national strength, growing societal diversity, and emerging intra-Party checks and balances are factors that strengthen rather than undermine CCP rule.³ In general, this perspective tends to underestimate the vulnerability of the authoritarian one-party system. New socio-economic forces in the country pose serious challenges to the CCP's resilient authoritarianism. Meanwhile, competing factions within the Party leadership may fail to broker the necessary deals to preserve Party unity.

Some of the fundamental flaws of the Chinese political system were on display in the spring 2012 political crisis concerning Bo Xilai 薄熙来, one of the Party's rising stars and chief of China's largest city, Chongqing. Official corruption, for example, is unprecedented in scope and scale in contemporary China. Ironically, Bo had been a leader known for his tough stance on corruption, having spearheaded a “smashing mafia” (*dahei* 打黑) campaign, but now most consider him to be a kind of “head of the mafia.” Consequently, public trust in the CCP's leadership has perhaps fallen to its lowest point in the post-Mao era. The Party has lost the moral high ground. If the allegations are shown to be true, it seems that absolutely no moral constraints were at play in the cases of Gu Kailai 谷開來 (Bo's wife), former Chongqing Police Chief

- 1 Perry Link, a long-time critic of the Chinese authorities, recently made a strong and valid critique of some American experts on China for their use of the terms “China” or “the Chinese” to “refer exclusively to elite circles” of the Chinese Communist Party. Link warned that allowing “China” to represent only a small elite “is dangerous in that it adumbrates nearly a fifth of the world's population. It also prevents a square consideration of how long the regime will last” (2012, 27). Interestingly, Gordon Chang, another well-known critic of the CCP leadership, has continued to predict “the coming collapse of China,” while primarily referring to the potential fall of the CCP (2011). For an earlier version of his thesis, see Chang 2001.
- 2 David Shambaugh, for example, observed that the CCP is a “reasonably strong and resilient institution” (2008, 176). See also Nathan 2003; Miller 2008b; Miller 2009.
- 3 According to Andrew Nathan, “the regime's institutional changes have so far served to consolidate rather than weaken authoritarianism” (2006, 3); see also Fewsmith 2006; Brown 2009; Dickson 2003; Dickson 2008; Tsai 2007; Yang 2004.

Wang Lijun 王立军 and Bo himself, which allegedly involved murder, assassination, torture and other abuses of power.⁴

Despite efforts on the part of the CCP leadership to earmark these incidents as “isolated and exceptional phenomena,” many PRC public intellectuals openly argue that rampant official corruption, especially when involving top CCP leaders’ families, exemplifies a decadent form of crony capitalism (*quanguo ziben-zhuyi* 权贵资本主义) that is more the rule than the exception in the Chinese political system.⁵ The Bo imbroglio is certainly not solely a reflection of his notorious egotism.⁶ The scandal is arguably the most serious political crisis since the 1989 Tiananmen incident and constitutes a major challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP leadership as a whole.

For the overseas China studies community, it is essential to go beyond superficial discussions of these Hollywood-like political spectacles, which in fact may obscure broader power shifts occurring behind these ostensibly unrelated events. In stark contrast to the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, China’s economy and society have, at least until now, seen little disruption in the wake of the Bo Xilai crisis, illustrating a scenario in which the country can remain largely intact despite a series of vicious power struggles in Zhongnanhai 中南海. Some American China analysts, however, have mistaken China’s national resilience for evidence of the CCP’s governing capacity and political legitimacy. Recent debates on “why China won’t collapse” are highly misleading because one can reasonably argue that the issue of the day is whether or not the Party will survive, not the country.⁷

China’s political future, especially the survival of its one-party system, is a controversial issue that should be subject to more rigorous intellectual and policy debates. The notion of resilient authoritarianism, the prevailing analytical framework with which many academics in the West have studied the Chinese political system in the last decade or so, must be re-examined in the light of recent political phenomena. An empirically well-grounded and balanced assessment of the unfolding political crisis is particularly valuable today, not only because China is at a crossroads in terms of domestic development, but also because it now has more influence on the world economy and regional security than at any other time in modern history. Misperception of China’s socio-economic

4 It was widely reported in overseas Chinese media that Jiang Zemin, former general secretary of the CCP, recently commented on the Bo Xilai scandal that “Bo has crossed the bottom line of human civilization.” *Sing Tao Daily*, 28 May 2012.

5 For example, Zhang Ming (2012) launched a strong critique of the rampancy of official corruption by dozens of CCP top leaders in March, a few months before the foreign media began to trace “family trees” of crony capitalism among the Chinese leadership. For the CCP authorities’ effort to make the Bo case “isolated and exceptional,” see Sina News, posted on 25 May 2012, <http://news.sina.com.hk/news/1617/3/1/2673095/1.html>.

6 Bo has been long famous for his political ambition (see Li 2001, 165–66). In the months preceding the crisis, Su Wei, a scholar close to Bo at the Chongqing Party School, compared Bo Xilai and Chongqing mayor Huang Qifan to former leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in comments circulated in both the Chongqing and national media. See Sina Global Newsnet, posted online on 20 September 2011 <http://dailynews.sina.com/bg/chn/chnnews/ausdaily/20110920/18402783790.html>.

7 For example, see Bell 2012.

conditions carries with it the risk of implementing ineffective government policies toward the PRC.

This article first presents a critical review of the main arguments for resilient authoritarianism and explains why they are inadequate in understanding Chinese politics today. It then identifies three transformative trends in the PRC. For the sake of clarity, these three developments are summarized in the form of three parallel phrases: 1) weak leaders, strong factions; 2) weak government, strong interest groups; and 3) weak Party, strong country.⁸ The shifting power of various constituencies in China reflects the multi-dimensional and dynamic changes underway in the country.

Resilient Authoritarianism: A Critical Review

Western scholarship on the Chinese state's resilient authoritarianism began to emerge in the mid-1990s and has become the mainstream position over the last decade. When the CCP survived the political turmoil of the 1989 Tiananmen incident, which had posed a serious legitimacy crisis, many China analysts began to appreciate the endurance and adaptability with which the Chinese leadership handled daunting challenges both at home and abroad. The political succession from Jiang Zemin 江泽民's third generation of leadership to Hu Jintao 胡锦涛's fourth generation, which took place at the 16th National Congress of the CCP in 2002, was remarkable for being the first time in PRC history that the CCP leadership conducted a peaceful, orderly and institutionalized transfer of power. It is quite common for overseas China analysts to view the CCP as being limber and adaptable enough to respond quickly to changes to their environment and to become better qualified and more competent with time. "The result," as some scholars have observed, "has been to create a power system characterized by 'authoritarian resilience.'"⁹

By definition, the CCP's resilient authoritarianism refers to a one-party political system that is able to "enhance the capacity of the state to govern effectively" through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments.¹⁰ According to some analysts, the CCP's resilient authoritarian system can successfully resist or prevent democratic demand. Not surprisingly, Party conservatives seek to reinforce the belief that "democracy is not appropriate for China," but that a resilient authoritarian system is.¹¹ This is evident, for example, in Chairman of the National People's Congress Wu Bangguo 吴邦国's recent pronouncement of the 'five nos' for China.¹²

8 Some of this discussion about the tripartite assessment of power shifts in China also previously appeared in my short opinion piece presented at the first annual conference of the Johnson Center for the Study of American Diplomacy, held in honour of Henry Kissinger at Yale University in March 2012. See Li 2012b.

9 Brodsgaard and Zheng 2006, 2.

10 Dickson 2005, 1.

11 *Ibid.*, 11.

12 Wu Bangguo's famous "five nos" refer to 1) no multiple party system; 2) no pluralism in ideology; 3) no checks and balances in power or bicameral parliament; 4) no federal system; and 5) no privatization. He

The authoritarian resilience thesis seems to hold up if one examines the change and continuity of the broad policy framework that each generation of CCP leaders has embraced over the past two decades. In his famous “southern tour” in 1992, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 called for greater market reform and economic privatization while continuing to crackdown on political dissent. Jiang Zemin broadened the power base of the CCP by recruiting entrepreneurs and other new socio-economic players (a formulation known as the “three represents”), while launching a harsh political campaign against the Falun Gong, an emerging group of religious believers. Hu Jintao’s populist appeal for a “harmonious society” sought to reduce economic disparities and social tensions while tightening censorship over the media and police control in society, especially in ethnic minority regions. In all of these major socio-economic and political developments, the CCP’s top leaders made a calculated but far-reaching ideological and policy move in one area, but resisted political pressure in another.

Some of the CCP adaptations were also the result of lessons learned from other authoritarian regimes. As David Shambaugh has observed, some of the CCP’s new policies and procedures were developed in response to systematic study of post-communist and non-communist Party states. The CCP proactively attempted to “reform and rebuild itself institutionally – thereby sustaining its political legitimacy and power.”¹³ According to Alice Miller, “the pattern of Hu Jintao’s leadership as first among equals suggests that they have managed to avoid a dictatorship as well as prevent the gerontocratic stagnation that the Soviet leadership suffered by the early 1980s because it failed to address the same issue.”¹⁴

Is the Chinese authoritarian system resilient? Insights from liberal PRC thinkers

To assume that the CCP’s resilient authoritarianism will allow the Party leadership to weather political storms in the years and decades to come, however, is to take the authoritarian resilience thesis too far. Richard McGregor, former Beijing bureau chief of the *Financial Times* and the author of the oft-cited book *The Party*, regarded the perception that “the Party can’t rule forever” as one of the “five myths about the Chinese Communist Party.”¹⁵ In his words, “Yes it can. Or at least for the foreseeable future.”¹⁶

Ironically, CCP official directives are often less optimistic about the Party’s capacity to govern and its non-democratic resilience. In September 2009, the

footnote continued

made this statement at the fourth plenary session of the 11th National People’s Congress held in Beijing on 11 March 2011. See *Zhongguo xinwen wang*, posted on 11 March 2011. http://www.china.com.cn/2011/2011-03/11/content_22114099.htm.

13 Shambaugh 2008, 9.

14 Miller 2008b, 77.

15 McGregor 2011. For the mentioned book, see McGregor 2010.

16 McGregor 2011.

Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the CCP called for the promotion of democracy within the Party and an intensification of the anti-corruption drive within the leadership. According to the directives adopted at the meeting, many problems internal to the CCP were exacerbated by new domestic and international circumstances and “are severely weakening the Party’s creativity, unity and effectiveness in dealing with these problems.”¹⁷ Therefore, careful management of the Party “has never been so arduous and urgent.”¹⁸ The directives particularly stress the importance of intra-Party democracy, describing it as the “lifeblood of the Party” (*dang de shengming* 党的生命).¹⁹ More recently, the *People’s Daily*, the Chinese official propaganda organ, issued an editorial on the 91st anniversary of the founding of the CCP that called for greater efforts to overcome four main crises confronting the Party, namely, “slacking spirit, lack of capacity, distance from the masses, and rampant corruption.”²⁰

It should be noted that for liberal CCP leaders like Wen Jiabao 温家宝, Li Yuanchao 李源潮, Wang Yang 汪洋 and their advisors, intra-Party democracy is only a means, not the end, of fulfilling China’s democratic aspirations. On many occasions, Wen, Li and Wang have argued explicitly that democracy reflects universal values and should be the shared aspiration of the Chinese people. In an interview with the Chinese media, Yu Keping 俞可平, a distinguished CCP theoretician, argued that it would be a grave mistake to assume that China only needs intra-Party democracy, instead of a truer people’s democracy (*renmin minzhu* 人民民主) or social democracy (*shehui minzhu* 社会民主), both of which would include grassroots and general democratic elections.²¹ For Yu, intra-Party democracy and people’s democracy are complementary. The former is top-down or inside-out and the latter is bottom-up, but ideally the two can meet in the middle. In a strategic sense, Yu Keping and his like-minded colleagues place great importance on intra-Party democracy with the objective that it will pave the way for Chinese democracy in a broader sense. Yu believes that China’s quest for democracy should, and eventually will, have a qualitative “breakthrough” of some sort.²²

Similarly, Wang Changjiang 王长江, professor and chairman of the department of Party building at the Central Party School (CPS), recently argued that the promotion of intra-Party democracy need not be at the expense of social democracy. He cited major recent crises, such as the ethnic tensions in Tibet and

17 See *People’s Daily* online, 19 September 2009: <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6761990.html>.

18 *Ibid.*

19 For the communiqué on the directives of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, see <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/10080626.html>.

20 “Jingshen xiedai, nengli bu zu, tuoli qunzhong, xiaoji fubai.” *Renmin ribao*, 1 July 2012, 1. Also see *Shijie ribao*, 1 July 2012, A5.

21 Yu 2009b.

22 See <http://www.hi.chinanews.com.cn/hnnew/2005-10-20/29705.html>, 20 August 2008; and also Yu 2009a, 1–6.

Xinjiang and social unrest elsewhere, to highlight the urgency of developing democracy in China. In Wang's words, "social democracy should not wait."²³ These views, expressed by the liberal scholars in the CCP establishment, differ profoundly from Richard McGregor's generalization that the Chinese people and leaders have no interest in democracy. McGregor recently stated: "The idea that China would one day become a democracy was always a Western notion, born of our theories about how political systems evolve. Yet all evidence so far suggests these theories are wrong."²⁴ McGregor's view is also incompatible with recent public opinion surveys in China. The English edition of *Global Times* (a branch of the official *People's Daily*) reported that its research centre recently conducted a survey of 1,010 people in seven Chinese cities and found that 63.6 per cent of respondents did not oppose adopting Western-style democracy in China.²⁵

Zi Zhongyun 资中筠, a distinguished scholar and former director of the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), apparently disagreed with both McGregor and conservative hardliners in the CCP leadership. In her recently edited book, she bluntly challenged CCP officials who have spread the false notions that democracy is not suitable for the Chinese people and that universal values are nothing but a Western conspiracy against China.²⁶ She used the term "obscurantism" (*mengmeizhuyi* 蒙昧主义) to describe the efforts on the part of those opposed to democratic change to mislead the Chinese public. She particularly warned of the danger of nationalism – the tendency to excuse injustice in society in the name of the state interests.²⁷ Zi observed that in every crucial moment of the century-long Chinese movement for democracy and constitutionalism, conservatives have always drawn on the so-called "Chinese essence" and patriotism to resist Western influence and China's political transformation.²⁸

One should note that Yu Keping, Wang Changjiang, and Zi Zhongyun are all CCP members who are part of the Chinese political establishment. None of them is a political dissident or someone who favours a radical bottom-up political uprising, although all three seem to be concerned about the lack of real political reform in recent years. Yet even these liberal thinkers within the Party have been pushing hard for democracy, the rule of law and human rights in China, which they regard as universal values rather than as mere Western ideas. They are no admirers of authoritarian resilience.

One can argue that if a political system is really resilient, it should always be open to new ideas and new experiments, as one change will lead to another.

23 Wang 2009.

24 McGregor 2011.

25 Also 49.4 % of people expected that China would have a revolution if the leadership fails to pursue real political reforms and only 8.5 % believed that revolution is impossible. Quoted from *Shijie ribao*, 15 March 2012, A12.

26 Zi 2011, 171.

27 *Ibid.*, 173.

28 *Ibid.*, 22.

Otherwise, it should be considered a stagnant system. Some Western scholars have also rejected the authoritarian resilience thesis. Richard Baum, for example, has argued that democracy is the political system most responsive to emergent social forces, and thus will emerge victorious in China as well as in many other parts of the world.²⁹

Is Chinese political institutionalization effective and sustainable?

More specifically, the authoritarian resilience thesis has apparently become increasingly problematic in the Chinese context. In his analysis of why the CCP has been able to remain in power since the 1989 Tiananmen incident, Andrew Nathan outlined four important institutional developments in the Chinese political system:

- 1) the increasingly norm-bound nature of its succession politics;
- 2) the increase in meritocratic, as opposed to factional, considerations in the promotion of political elites;
- 3) the differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime; and
- 4) the establishment of institutions for political participation that strengthen the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large.³⁰

All of these institutional mechanisms have been on the agenda of the CCP leadership. Some have already affected the political behaviour of leaders and changed the game of Chinese elite politics over the past decade or so. But one can also argue that for now none of them has been very effective in making the system more resilient.

Regarding Nathan's first point, it is true that some institutional rules and norms have developed over the past two decades, such as term limits and age requirements for retirement. They not only generate a sense of increased consistency and fairness in the selection of leaders, but also speed up the circulation of the Chinese political elite. Some of yesterday's solutions, however, are becoming today's problems. One of the most important phenomena in present-day China is the fact that many retired leaders have become increasingly outspoken when it comes to criticizing the policies adopted by the current leadership. This is a healthy political development that has led Chinese politics to become more transparent and more pluralistic, but it is also very politically sensitive for a country that has placed such a high priority on harmony and stability. While retired leaders' criticisms may reflect their genuine consciousness about the need for sound policies at this crucial moment in China's development, they can also be seen as a way that retired leaders express their personal dissatisfaction and anger.

29 Baum 2007. For other strong criticisms of CCP resilient authoritarianism, see Pei 2008; Shirk 2007; Lü 2000.

30 Nathan 2003, 6–7.

Due to term and age limits, many capable leaders in good health have had to step down in their late 50s. Some of them later pursued business activities (*xiahai* 下海) after retirement, and some seized this “last opportunity” to use political power for personal gain or other malfeasance, known in China as “the age 59 phenomenon” (*wushijiu sui xianxiang* 五十九岁现象).³¹ As a result of the strict implementation of institutional regulations and norms over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of retired leaders, and they have become an important political force in their own right. Unless the CCP authorities adopt more electoral mechanisms in the selection of senior leaders, the issues of age discrimination and the political resentment of retired leaders will likely become increasingly acute.

Prior to the Bo Xilai crisis, many analysts believed that Chinese political institutionalization had developed well enough to make the upcoming leadership succession at the 18th Party Congress as smooth and orderly as the one in 2002. The most notable recent example is a book published by Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a businessman who has since become a biographer of the PRC's senior leaders. Through extensive interviews with many rising stars of the so-called fifth generation of PRC leaders, Kuhn offered nothing but praise for their talents, wisdom and vision.³² Kuhn and other like-minded overseas analysts have overlooked the CCP's deficiencies – or more precisely, the stagnancy of the authoritarian system – when it comes to selecting its national leaders. The importance of the Bo Xilai episode was, to a great extent, the fact that he aggressively and unprecedentedly campaigned to obtain a seat in the next Politburo Standing Committee. While Bo has been purged possibly for his alleged crimes and his “violation of party rules,” until a more legitimate mechanism to select leaders is implemented these problems will continue to undermine the leadership unity and the Party's governance capacity.

With respect to intra-Party checks and balances as a whole, Chinese leadership politics has indeed undergone a process of increasing institutionalization over the past decade, as Alice Miller has observed.³³ My study of the possible emergence of bipartisanship within the upper echelons of the CCP also focused on new norms and practices in Chinese elite politics.³⁴ It is important to recognize, however, that newly developed institutional experiments can either fail or lead to further and greater changes if the system is genuinely resilient.

Nathan's second point about meritocracy in the formation of the Chinese leadership might resonate well in the West. In many cases, political leaders in Western democracies are not well prepared, educationally or professionally, before being elected to office. Relatively speaking, Chinese leaders have been well educated, which was especially true in the case of the third generation of

31 Many of the senior level leaders who were purged on corruption charges had begun to engage in bribery, embezzlement, and other illegal activities at the age of 59 – the year before their retirement.

32 Kuhn 2010.

33 Miller 2008a.

34 For a detailed discussion of the origin of the new norms and practices, see Li 2005.

leadership led by Jiang Zemin – many of whom studied overseas (in the Soviet Union and the East European countries in the 1950s) – as well as Hu Jintao’s fourth generation, in which a majority were engineers by training.³⁵ In a sense, these leaders could be seen as technocrats. As for the upcoming fifth generation of leaders, although they are less technocratic than the last two generations, some have studied in the West or Japan as visiting scholars. Generally speaking, they seem more informed about world affairs than their counterparts in other countries. According to some foreign observers, a majority of Chinese national leaders have previously served as municipal and provincial leaders for many years or even decades, and are thus well prepared for the national stage.

However, in the eyes of the Chinese public, especially critics of the Party, the current method of selecting PRC leaders is anything but meritocratic. In the absence of democratic competition, nepotism in various forms (such as blood ties, school ties, regional identities, *mishu* 秘书 or personal assistant experiences and patron–client ties) continues to play a crucial role. Three new phenomena deserve special attention.

First, all of the leading candidates for the next Politburo, and especially the Standing Committee that will be formed during the 18th Party Congress in the autumn of 2012, are well known for their strong family backgrounds, factional affiliations or other patron–client ties. One can reasonably argue, as many in China do, that their rise to the pinnacle of power in the most populous country in the world has had more to do with heavyweight patrons than with their own leadership credentials and administrative achievements.

Second, a large number of the fifth and sixth generation leaders hold post-graduate degrees. For example, among the 402 newly appointed Standing Committee members of China’s 31 provincial-level Party committees, 298 (74 per cent) hold post-graduate degrees and 92 (22.8 per cent) have PhD degrees.³⁶ However, a closer look at these leaders reveals that an overwhelming majority of them attended these degree programmes on a part-time basis, often in recent years while they served as senior leaders in municipal and provincial governments.

These advanced degrees have even become a liability for these leaders. Minxin Pei, a prominent US-based scholar of Chinese elite politics, has called this phenomenon of inflated advanced degrees among Chinese officials a sign of “systemic cheating.”³⁷ As Pei puts it, “many Chinese officials use fake or dubiously acquired academic credentials to burnish their resumes ... in order to gain an advantage in the competition for power.”³⁸ Along the same lines, Wang Yukai 汪玉凯, professor in the Chinese Academy of Governance, recently pointed

35 For a more detailed discussion of the educational backgrounds of the third and fourth generations, see Li 2001.

36 *Nanfang dushi bao*, 4 July 2012. Also see http://nf.nfdaily.cn/nfdsb/content/2012-07/04/content_49948516.htm.

37 Pei 2012.

38 *Ibid.*

out, "When you see these part-time degrees obtained by senior leaders, you cannot rule out the possibility that they are fraudulent."³⁹

The third phenomenon is undoubtedly the most troubling. It has been widely reported even in official Chinese media that in order to get appointments and promotions, some officials, especially those who do not have strong family backgrounds or political connections (*guanxi* 关系), have routinely used bribes to "purchase office" (*maiguan* 买官).⁴⁰ According to the Hong Kong and Singapore media (though not verified), Liu Zhijun 刘志军, a former minister of railways, intended to use two billion yuan to "purchase" the post of vice premiership, and even a seat in the 2012 Politburo, before he was arrested on corruption charges in February 2011.⁴¹ These three phenomena have understandably tarnished the CCP's reputation for meritocracy among the Chinese public.

Regarding the separation of power in the Chinese political system, since the 1989 purge of Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 the CCP has explicitly stated that it is not interested in pursuing a Western-style tripartite division of government. Instead, the leadership has proposed institutional separation of the Party into three divisions, namely: decision-making, policy implementation, and supervision. Given that CCP power remains unchecked, however, what Andrew Nathan has described as the "functional specialization of institutions within the regime" has largely consisted of empty words on the part of the Party leadership.

For example, judicial power has been increasingly marginalized in the PRC political structure over the past decade, as the Party has strongly resisted judicial independence and given infinite power to the Central Commission of Politics and Law (CCPL) of the CCP. The Central Commission of Politics and Law, known as *zhengfawei* 政法委, oversees all law enforcement authorities, including the Supreme People's Court, Supreme People's Procuratorate, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of State Security, making it a very powerful organ.⁴²

This absence of functional specialization between Chinese governmental institutions undermines arguments that channels for political participation have broadened – the fourth area of Chinese institutional development that Nathan describes. According to Bruce Dickson, the CCP has created new political institutions "to channel political participation and to provide a bridge between state and society," such as village elections and government offices for petition letters and complaint visits (known as the *xinfang* 信访 system).⁴³ Some Western observers argue that "in China, protests, corruption probes and village elections

39 Xinhua News Net, 4 July 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-07/04/c_123366738.htm.

40 Pei 2012.

41 *Lianhe zaobao*, 27 February 2011. Also see <http://www.zaobao.com/wencui/2011/02/hongkong110227c.shtml>.

42 All the Party committees of provinces, municipalities and counties establish respective politics and law commissions.

43 Dickson 2005, 4.

provide a certain degree of accountability without democracy.”⁴⁴ The number and scale of group protests, however, have increased in recent years and some have become increasingly violent. In response, the Chinese leadership has lately adopted what Mary Gallagher calls “a mixture of carrots and sticks” – political repression on one hand and growth-producing public goods on the other.”⁴⁵ The fact that the CCP leadership has been paranoid about the need to maintain social stability shows the serious limitations of institutionalized public participation.

Will today's ally become tomorrow's challenger? The role of the middle class

One of the central arguments of the “authoritarian resilience” thesis is that the CCP has relied on economic development and material incentives to prevent grassroots demand for socio-political challenges. “The main reason why the CCP is so strong,” a foreign journalist has observed, “is that the Chinese are aware of the improvements that have been made in such a short period of time.”⁴⁶ New socio-economic forces, especially entrepreneurs and the emerging middle class, are understood to be political allies of the CCP regime.⁴⁷

But this assumption should be subject to greater scrutiny. Just as yesterday’s political target could be today’s political ally, so too could today’s political ally become tomorrow’s political rabble-rouser. Recent studies conducted in China have found that the Chinese middle class, more than other social groups, tends to be cynical about the policy promises made by authorities, more demanding of policy implementation and more sensitive when it comes to official corruption.⁴⁸ If middle-class Chinese begin to feel that their voices are being suppressed, that their access to information is unjustly being blocked or that their space for social action is being unduly confined, increased political dissent may begin to take shape.⁴⁹

The Chinese middle class’s grievances over government policy have become increasingly evident, partly because the expansion of the middle class has slowed and economic disparity has increased in recent years. The high unemployment rate among recent college graduates (who usually come from middle-class families and are presumed to be members of China’s future middle class) should send an alarming signal to the Chinese government. In a recent forum on China’s response to the global financial crisis held by the Academy of Chinese Reform and Development in Beijing, Chinese scholars argued that the government should pay much greater attention to the needs and concerns of the middle

44 Dimitrov 2008, 27.

45 Gallagher 2009.

46 Vela 2009.

47 The definition of the Chinese middle class is often based on sets of combined criteria including occupation, income, consumption and self-identification. See Li Chunling 2010.

48 Zhang 2008.

49 For a more detailed discussion of the complicated and changing role of the middle class in Chinese politics, see Li Chunling 2010.

class – otherwise, they argued, the “sensitive” Chinese middle class could become the “angry” middle class.⁵⁰

Members of the Chinese middle class have indeed been up in arms over official corruption and the CCP leadership's lack of accountability and transparency in cases such as food safety, environmental pollution and the 2011 Wenzhou bullet train incident that killed 40 passengers. Like their counterparts elsewhere, the Chinese middle class is also interested in media freedom and resents government censorship.

The Chinese middle class is particularly concerned about the increasingly obvious oligarchic power of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), a trend working at the expense of the private sector. A study conducted by Chinese scholars shows that the total profits made by China's 500 largest private companies in 2009 were less than the total revenues of two SOE companies, China Mobile and Sinopec.⁵¹ Ironically, the private sector's net return on investment in 2009 was 8.2 per cent, compared to the 3.1 per cent for SOEs.⁵² The impressive growth of China Mobile has been attributed, at least partially, to the company's monopoly on China's domestic telecommunications market. With large SOEs monopolizing the telecommunications sector, there is no incentive for these flagship companies to pursue technological innovation.

Xu Xiaonian 许小年, a professor of economics and finance at the China Europe International Business School in Shanghai, uses the term “crony capitalism” or “state capitalism,” to express his reservations about this growing trend toward state monopoly.⁵³ He believes that, with the rapid expansion of SOEs in the past few years, China has in fact begun to reverse Deng Xiaoping's plan for the country's development. In Xu's view, China is drawing the wrong lessons from the recent global financial crisis and heading in the wrong direction. According to Xu, the main beneficiaries of SOE growth are corrupt officials, not the Chinese public. He believes that in today's China, entrepreneurs only exist in the private sector and not in SOEs, because SOE managers have neither an entrepreneurial spirit nor a sense of responsibility for their companies' losses.⁵⁴ Generally speaking, private entrepreneurs have always been denied bank loans and preferential policies.

Echoing Xu's critique, Chen Zhiwu, an economist at Yale University, observes that 25.5 per cent of fiscal expenditures in China in 2011 were used for social welfare, public health, education and other public goods, while 38 per cent of fiscal expenditures were spent as administrative expenses. By contrast, in the

50 Hu Xiao 2009, 1.

51 *Beijing shangbao*, 30 August 2010. See also http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2010-08/30/c_12496387.htm.

52 See <http://xuxiaonian.blog.sohu.com/160724498.html>.

53 For Xu Xiaonian's views, see <http://xuxiaonian.blog.sohu.com/158818651.html>. And *Lianhe zaobao*, 1 August 2010, <http://finance.ifeng.com/opinion/zjgc/20100830/2567934.shtml>. Also see Bremmer 2010; Huang 2008.

54 See <http://finance.ifeng.com/news/20101205/3005151.shtml>.

United States the fiscal expenditures on these two categories were 73 and 10 per cent, respectively.⁵⁵ He called for a reallocation of resources, through democratic reforms in the Chinese political system, to help the country's middle and lower classes.

Three Transformative Trends

This review of the resilient authoritarianism thesis suggests that thinking of the Chinese political system in monolithic terms tends to lead to dogmatic cynicism, on the one hand, or wishful thinking on the other. While the CCP's omnipresence and its future should be a central concern, we need to explore the internal dynamics and tensions within the Party in greater detail. At the same time, transformative trends in broader contexts – the shifting power and relative strength and weakness of other factors besides the Party – deserve greater attention. Altogether, they can help us reconcile in a more holistic way the widely divergent phenomena and contrasting analyses discussed above.

Trend one: weak leaders, strong factions

Over the past three decades, China has been gradually moving away from rule by a single, charismatic all-powerful leader such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping toward a collective form of leadership. This transformation has ended the era of strongman politics and, to a certain extent, China's long history of arbitrary decision-making by a lone individual. This transition, of course, has been a gradual process. Mao Zedong 毛泽东, a god-like figure, wielded almost limitless power, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Mao routinely made major policy decisions alone, such as the devastating Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁶ During the Deng era, as a result of his legendary political career and formidable patron-client ties, a set of reform initiatives – including establishing special economic zones and sending students to study in the West – were carried out with little resistance. Following the Tiananmen incident Deng maintained his role as China's paramount leader even while he held no important leadership position.⁵⁷

Both Jiang Zemin of the third generation and Hu Jintao of the fourth are technocrats who lack the charisma and revolutionary credentials of Deng, but both had broad administrative experience and were good at coalition-building and reaching political compromises. They were, to a great extent, no more than “first among equals” in their respective generations of collective leadership. They could hardly put to use the sort of power enjoyed by Deng, especially when it came to commanding the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

55 Chen 2012.

56 Teiwes and Sun 1998; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2008; Hu Angang 2009.

57 Vogel 2011.

Nevertheless, both Jiang and Hu owed much of their power to Deng's endorsement.

As the Hu Jintao era comes to an end, Chinese elites have started to review his administration, and a central theme is a profound sense of disappointment. Hu has been criticized – fairly or not – for his “inaction” (*wuwei* 无为) – a popular term in both Chinese blogs and everyday conversations. Some prominent Chinese public intellectuals have openly called the two five-year terms of the Hu leadership “the lost decade.”⁵⁸ Premier Wen Jiabao has also been regarded as “weak” and “ineffective.”

These criticisms of Hu and Wen may only reflect the views of some interest groups and opinion leaders, and not necessarily the general public. China's vast population of farmers and migrant workers may still see Hu and Wen as leaders who have worked to protect and advance their interests, and many liberal intellectuals in China still seem to consider Wen their best hope for arriving at real political reform. But these widely held negative sentiments nevertheless serve to undermine the power and authority of the Hu–Wen administration.

The profound shift in the source and legitimacy of the leadership is even more salient for the emerging fifth generation of leaders. At the start of their tenure, the upcoming generation of leaders, led by the dual-successor pair Xi Jinping 习近平 and Li Keqiang 李克强, are likely even weaker than their predecessors due to their lack of previous achievements, their need to share power and the growing competitive pressure among their peers. They thus will have to rely even more on collective leadership when making major decisions. In line with this development, Chinese authorities have placed increasing emphasis on “collective leadership,” which the 2007 Party Congress Communiqué defines as “a system with division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision making by a single top leader.”⁵⁹

Collective leadership naturally makes factional politics all the more essential. The CCP leadership is now structured around two informal coalitions or factions that check and balance each other's power. The two groups can be labelled the “populist coalition” (*mincui tongmeng* 民粹同盟) led by President Hu Jintao, and the “elitist coalition” (*jingying tongmeng* 精英同盟) which emerged in the Jiang era and is currently led by Wu Bangguo, chairman of the national legislature (and currently the second highest ranking leader in the CCP). The two most likely top leaders after the 18th Party Congress, elitist Xi and populist Li, each represent one of these coalitions. This division of power can be referred to as the “one Party, two coalitions” (*yi dang, liang pai* 一党两派) political mechanism.⁶⁰

The elitist coalition consists mainly of princelings (leaders whose parents are high-ranking officials) and the Shanghai gang (leaders who advanced their political careers in Shanghai when Jiang was the Party chief there in the 1980s), while

58 Li and Cary 2011.

59 Xinhua News Net, 15 October 2011, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-10-15/113314089759.shtml>.

60 Li 2005.

the populist coalition consists primarily of former Chinese Communist Youth league officials (known as *tuanpai* 团派), which is Hu Jintao's power base. These two coalitions have contrasting policy initiatives and priorities. The elitist coalition emphasizes GDP growth while the populist coalition advocates social justice and social cohesion. In general, the elitist group dominates the economic and financial sectors and represents the interests of the coastal region while the populist coalition prevails in Party organizations and often claims to voice the concerns of the inland region. In terms of political reforms, leaders of the populist coalition are more interested in promoting intra-Party elections than their counterparts in the elitist coalition, because even members of the political establishment, such as delegates to the Party Congress, often vote against well-known princelings. For example, Bo Xilai was eliminated twice in the elections for the Central Committee at the Party Congress in the 1990s.

Factional politics is, of course, not a new development in the PRC. Major events during the Mao era, such as the Anti-Rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, were all related to factional infighting within the CCP leadership. But factional politics in present-day China is no longer a winner-takes-all zero-sum game. This is largely because these two political camps have almost equal power. They have divided the number of seats in the top leadership organizations into a near-perfect balance.

Table 1 shows that in every important leadership body in 2011 (prior to Bo Xilai's downfall), the elitist coalition and populist coalition have had an equal

Table 1: **Equal Allocation of Seats 团派 Two Coalitions (2011)**

	Elitist Coalition (Jiang's Camp)	Populist Coalition (Hu's Camp)
Politburo Standing Committee (fifth Generation)	Xi Jinping 习近平 (princeling)	Li Keqiang 李克强 (<i>tuanpai</i>)
Politburo (fifth Generation)	Xi Jinping (princeling) Wang Qishan 王岐山 (princeling) Bo Xilai 薄熙来(princeling)	Li Keqiang (<i>tuanpai</i>) Li Yuanchao 李源潮 (<i>tuanpai</i>) Wang Yang 汪洋 (<i>tuanpai</i>)
Secretariat (fifth Generation)	Xi Jinping (princeling) Wang Huning 王沪宁 (Shanghai gang)	Li Yuanchao (<i>tuanpai</i>) Ling Jihua 令计划 (<i>tuanpai</i>)
Vice Premier	Wang Qishan (princeling) Zhang Dejiang 张德江 (princeling)	Li Keqiang (<i>tuanpai</i>) Hui Liangyu 回良玉 (Hu protégé)
State Councillor (civilian)	Ma Kai 马凯 (princeling) Meng Jianzhu 孟建柱 (Shanghai gang)	Liu Yandong 刘延东 (<i>tuanpai</i>) Dai Bingguo 戴秉国 (Hu protégé)

Notes and sources:

For the definition of the fifth generation of CCP leaders and the formation of the two coalitions, see Li 2008b; Li 2012a.

allocation of seats in terms of either the representation of fifth-generation leaders or general composition. The two coalitions have managed to arrange a perfect balance of power among the fifth generation of rising stars (one of each in the PSC, three of each in the Politburo and two of each in the six-member Secretariat, an important leadership body that handles the Party's routine business and administrative matters. This balance was also evident in the composition of the four vice premiers and four state councillors (civilian members) in the State Council, including both the fourth and fifth generations.⁶¹

These two camps have different leadership skills and expertise, as well as access to different socio-economic and political resources. The remarkably meteoric falls of two "heavyweight rising stars" in the Politburo – Shanghai Party Chief Chen Liangyu 陈良宇 (a member of the Shanghai gang) in 2006 and Chongqing Party Chief Bo Xilai (a princeling) in 2012 – are testimony to the phenomenon of "weak leaders, strong factions." Faction leaders involved in serious scandals can be easily dismissed, but factions or coalitions are too strong to be dismantled. The leaders who replaced Chen and Bo, Xi Jinping and Zhang Dejiang, came from the same respective coalitions. Deals have to be made in the shared interest of the CCP's survival. Checks and balances of power between these two coalitions have remained intact in the wake of both crises.

Neither the elitist coalition nor the populist coalition can, or even wants to, totally defeat the other. Each coalition has its own strengths, including representing different constituencies, which the other does not possess. Their relationship, when it comes to policy-making, is one of both competition and cooperation. For example, the Party leadership will be extremely cautious and will avoid expanding the scope of the Bo Xilai case to other senior leaders. Purges will be relatively limited. The fact that certain leaders closely affiliated with Bo, such as Chongqing Mayor Huang Qifan 黄奇帆, have remained in their leadership posts implies that the top leadership does not intend to punish too many people. The fact that the country is facing so many destabilizing factors on the eve of the 18th Party Congress will also impel the leadership to limit the scope of recrimination.

Therefore, though the Bo case is a victory for Hu's camp, this victory will not necessarily translate into additional populist seats on the Politburo Standing Committee. The makeup of the future Standing Committee will largely be determined through compromises between the two coalitions. The balance of power within this system will not be easily changed. If the princeling faction were to collapse, this would constitute an unimaginable revolution. Thus, at the moment, there is a tremendous incentive for the Party's top leadership to preserve the current structure of "one Party, two coalitions," and display unity and solidarity.

Because factional politics play such an important role in present-day China, understanding the composition of the next Politburo Standing Committee (PSC)

61 Two *tuantai* leaders, Li Yuanchao and Liu Yandong, are also princelings in terms of their family backgrounds, but their career experiences and close political association with Hu Jintao (who played a direct role in their promotion to the Politburo) make them more loyal to Hu and the populist coalition.

Table 2: **Factional Identities of the Leading Candidates for the Post-2012 Politburo Standing Committee**

Elitist Coalition (Jiang's Camp)			Populist Coalition (Hu's Camp)		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Current Position</i>	<i>Factional Identity</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Current Position</i>	<i>Factional Identity</i>
Xi Jinping 习近平	Vice President	princeling	Li Keqiang 李克强	Executive Vice Premier	<i>tuanpai</i>
Wang Qishan 王岐山	Vice Premier	princeling	Li Yuanchao 李源潮	Head, Organization Department	<i>tuanpai</i>
Zhang Dejiang 张德江	Vice Premier	princeling	Liu Yunshan 刘云山	Head, Propaganda Department	<i>tuanpai</i>
Zhang Gaoli 张高丽	Tianjin Party Secretary	Jiang's protégé	Wang Yang 汪洋	Guangdong Party Secretary	<i>tuanpai</i>
Yu Zhengsheng 俞正声	Shanghai Party Secretary	princeling	Liu Yandong 刘延东	State Councillor	<i>tuanpai</i>
Meng Jianzhu 孟建柱	Minister of Public Security	Shanghai gang	Ling Jihua 令计划	Head, CCP General Office	<i>tuanpai</i>
Zhang Chunxian 张春贤	Xinjiang Party Secretary	Jiang's protégé	Hu Chunhua 胡春华	Hebei Party Secretary	<i>tuanpai</i>

Source:
Li 2012a.

tends to attract the greatest attention in the study of Chinese politics. While no one knows which seven or nine leaders will eventually reach this pivotal body of power, 14 leaders stand out among their peers as leading candidates (see Table 2). This list is based on a combination of factors such as the leaders' current positions, ages, term limits on the Politburo, tenures on the CCP Central Committee, and previous leadership experiences.⁶²

Among the 14 candidates listed, ten currently serve on the 25-member Politburo and two (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) are already on the current PSC. It is interesting to note that these leading candidates are equally divided by political coalition – seven elitists and seven populists. Within the elitist coalition, four leaders are princelings, two are the protégés of Jiang Zemin and one is a prominent member of the Shanghai Gang. Within the populist coalition, all seven are *tuanpai* leaders who have strong patron–client ties to Hu Jintao.

These two coalitions share an interest in domestic social stability and aspire to continue China's rise on the world stage, and these common goals often lead the

62 For a detailed discussion of the credentials of these candidates, see Li 2012a.

two coalitions to compromise and cooperate with each other. Yet, as Chinese society becomes increasingly pluralistic in views and values – and as the Chinese leadership confronts a variety of daunting policy challenges – policy differences within the leadership are likely to become more transparent to the public.

Trend two: weak government, strong interest groups

Compared with many other countries in the world, the PRC government has tremendous financial and political resources, largely as a result of both its rapid economic growth and its authoritarian political system. Yet the Chinese government faces a multitude of daunting problems, such as economic disparities, inflation, a possible property bubble, growing local debt, rampant official corruption, frequent instances of social unrest, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, food safety and public health security issues, the lack of a social safety net, and ethnic tensions in Xinjiang and Tibet.

It has been widely noted that the State Council has become less effective at controlling China's provinces, major cities and even key SOEs with regards to economic policies. A recent, popular barb, that “the premier cannot control a general manager” (*zongli guanbuliao zong jingli* 总理管不了总经理), reflects serious problems with the administrative capacity of the central government. The tension and competition between the two competing coalitions discussed earlier also tend to make the decision-making process lengthier and more complicated, which could even result in deadlock one day. China is no democracy, but in this regard might develop some problems characteristic of democracies. Purged local chiefs, most noticeably Bo Xilai and Chen Liangyu, were also known for their explicit challenges to the authority and the policy initiatives of Premier Wen and the central government.

More importantly, never in the six-decade history of the PRC have interest groups been as powerful and influential as they have been in recent years. Like elsewhere in the world, Chinese interest groups are a diverse lot. They include, for example, geographic regions, bureaucratic institutions, the military, the increasingly commercialized media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local governments.

Local governments in the coastal and inland regions are political interest groups that exert strong influence in Beijing and work to ensure that the central government adopts socio-economic policies that advance their regional interests.⁶³ By way of background: in 2010 among China's 100 wealthiest counties 93, including the top 40, were located in coastal provinces.⁶⁴ According to one recent study, nearly 90 per cent of China's exports still come from the coastal

63 For the local factors in sociopolitical changes in China and other East and Southeast Asian countries, see White, Zhou and Rigger 2013 forthcoming.

64 See <http://bbs.nhzt.com/viewthread.php?tid=377464>.

provinces.⁶⁵ In the past few years, provincial and local governments' "liaison offices in Beijing" (*zhujingban* 驻京办), the region-based Chinese lobbying groups, have rapidly increased in number. In January 2010, the central government had to issue new regulations to substantially reduce the permitted number of these offices representing local interests and to require financial auditing of the remaining lobbying groups at the provincial and municipality levels.⁶⁶

In terms of social strata, Chinese interest groups can be categorized into three major groups: corporate and industrial interest groups (known as the "black collar" stratum), the previously discussed emerging middle class ("white collar" professionals), and vulnerable social groups such as migrants ("blue collar" workers). The term "black collar" was recently created in China to refer to the increasing number of the rich and powerful who dress in black, drive black cars, have hidden incomes, live secret lives with concubines, have ties to the criminal underground (*heishehui* 黑社会, or black society) and, most importantly, operate their businesses and wield their economic power in an opaque manner.⁶⁷ China's most active corporate and industrial interest groups consist mainly of two clusters. The first includes business elites who work in state monopolized industries such as banking, oil, electricity, coal, telecommunications, aviation, railway, tobacco and shipping; and the second consists of the lobby groups who work for state, foreign or private firms in sectors such as real estate. It has been widely reported in the Chinese media that business interest groups have routinely bribed local officials and formed a "wicked coalition" with local governments.⁶⁸

For example, the various players associated with property development have emerged as one of the most powerful special interest groups in present-day China. The strong power of this group explains why it took 13 years for China to pass the anti-monopoly law, why the macroeconomic control policy of the last decade was largely ineffective and why the widely acknowledged property bubble has continued to grow. In each of these cases, corporate and industrial interest groups have encroached upon the governmental decision-making process, either by creating government policy deadlock or manipulating policies in their own favour.

According to the official state account, more than 70 per cent of the total 120 companies under the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) were engaged in the real estate business and property

65 Yao 2010. Also see <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65947/the-end-of-the-beijing-consensus?page=show>.

66 *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan*, 23 January 2010.

67 It is unclear who first coined the term black-collar stratum. Most online postings in China attribute the label to US-educated economist Lang Xianping (Larry Lang), but Lang has publicly denied that he wrote the widely circulated article that popularized the term. See "The Black-Collar Class" (www.chinatranslated.com/?p=407). Translated: "Commentary and Analysis on China's Economic and Political Situation," June 12, 2009.

68 *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*, 13 January 2006, *Liaowang*, 5 December 2005, and also see <http://www.chinesenewsnet.com>, 12 December 2005.

development in 2010.⁶⁹ In response, the State Council ordered 78 SASAC companies to withdraw their investments in the real estate business.⁷⁰ But resistance from these companies made the government order largely ineffective. Some have speculated that a significant portion of the stimulus package (4 trillion yuan or US\$586 billion) implemented in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis was misdirected to property development. According to a senior researcher of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, about 32 per cent of the stimulus package was invested in real estate.⁷¹

As for the lower social strata, a manual labour shortage in some coastal cities in recent years reflects the growing political consciousness of these so-called vulnerable social groups (*ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体), especially among the younger generation of migrant workers, to protect their own rights. They have become increasingly resentful over all sorts of discriminative policies against migrant workers, farmers and urban poor. They have moved from one job to the next in order to receive a well-deserved, decent salary. At least partly due to their tireless demands, China has recently witnessed a dramatic increase in wages.

Challenges arising from restive social groups and greedy corporate interest groups are not unique to reform-era China. Democracies in the West (and the East) are certainly not immune to these problems. Quite the contrary, public petitions for social justice and protests against governments' domestic or foreign policies are often seen as part of the normal socio-economic and political life of these countries.

As for the corporate and industrial interest groups, they are probably equally, if not more, powerful and influential in some Western countries than they are in China. In the US, for example, hundreds of lobbying groups have flooded into Washington DC and now constitute an essential feature of American politics. From time to time, these business lobbies have been caught manipulating the democratic system for a company's commercial gain. In his classic work on democracy, Robert Dahl argues that the development of Western democracies is a process dominated by many different sets of leaders, each having access to a different combination of political resources and representing the interests of different sectors and groups in the society.⁷² The democratic pluralist system disperses power, influence, authority and control away from any single group of power elites sharing the same social background toward a variety of individuals, groups, associations and organizations.⁷³ In a sense, democracy is a matter of establishing rules for mediating conflicting interests among social groups in a given society. Yao Yang 姚洋, a professor at Peking University, has argued along the same lines: "An open and inclusive political process has generally

69 *Qianjiang wanbao*, 11 February 2010. Also see <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/estate/estate-lspl/news/2010/02-11/2121577.shtml>.

70 See http://bt.xinhuanet.com/2010-03/19/content_19293215.htm.

71 See http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2009-03/17/content_11024848.htm.

72 Dahl 1961, 68.

73 Dahl 1961, 252 and 270.

checked the power of interest groups in advanced democracies such as the United States. Indeed, this is precisely the mandate of a disinterested government – to balance the demands of different social groups.”⁷⁴

Interest group politics should be seen as neither a threat to socio-political stability nor a challenge to the legitimacy of the government, but rather are regarded as necessary components of democratic governance. The key to coordinating interest group politics, both Dahn and Yao argue, is to establish institutional and democratic mechanisms. Various interests groups can exert their influence through elections, bureaucratic decision-making and judicial processes. In response, the independence of the media and the supremacy of the constitution supervise and safeguard the democratic process. Political crises do occur from time to time, but democratic institutions in general and interest group politics in particular (including the important role of the middle class) are not the source of socio-political instability, but rather the foundation of long-term stability. The rapid emergence of various forms of interest groups and resulting new dynamics in Chinese politics has already profoundly changed how the country is governed.

Trend three: weak party, strong country

The Chinese Communist Party is the world’s largest ruling party, consisting of 4 million grassroots branches and 82.6 million members, and it continues to grow. In the absence of any organized opposition, the Party seems unchallengeable in the near future. It should be noted that China’s political reforms, including intra-Party democracy, have made almost no progress at all since the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee in the autumn of 2009. This may be attributed to two situational factors. First, the 2008 global financial crisis revealed problems in Western democracies and thus led some left-wing Chinese leaders and public intellectuals, especially advocates for resilient authoritarianism, to argue for the vitality and advantages of one-Party rule in China. Second, the Arab Spring presented a disturbing picture to CCP leaders, as they could face the same outcome as the Mubarak regime. As a result, a majority of CCP leaders across the factional dividing line have decided not to pursue further political reforms. Instead, they have exerted tighter control over social gatherings, grassroots elections, the media and civil society.

One can reasonably assume that the paranoid and excessive use of police force in reaction to the so-called “Chinese Jasmine Revolution” in front of the McDonald’s near Tiananmen Square in February 2011 was a sign of the Party’s weakness.⁷⁵ It is also a sign of weakness that the total amount of money used for “maintaining social stability” in 2009 was 514 billion yuan – almost

74 Yao 2010.

75 A widely spread political joke described the composition of the 1,000 people gathered in front of the McDonald’s restaurant in Wangfujing, Beijing, that day. Among them, 990 were said to be undercover police, eight were foreign journalists, one was US Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman who “just happened to be there” and one was actually a protestor.

identical to China's total national defence budget (532 billion yuan) that year. The Chinese government's budget for national defence in 2012 was 670.3 billion yuan, but the budget for the police and other public security expenditures was 701.8 billion yuan (an 11.5 per cent increase).⁷⁶ It is widely believed that the Chinese authorities spent 60 million yuan annually looking after Chen Guangcheng 陈光诚 alone, mainly by hiring about 100 local police and other cadres.⁷⁷

The large-scale outflow of capital in recent years (presumably by corrupt officials) further indicates Party elites' lack of confidence in the country's socio-political stability. According to a 2011 report released by Washington-based Global Financial Integrity (GFI), from 2000 to 2009 China's illegal capital outflow totalled US\$2.74 trillion, five times more than the total amount from the second-ranked country, Mexico.⁷⁸ The People's Bank of China reported in 2011 that from the mid-1990s to 2008, thousands of government officials and state-owned enterprise executives moved a total of 800 billion yuan (US\$126 billion) overseas.⁷⁹

According to an internal report by the CCP Organization Department, of the 8,370 senior executives in China's 120 companies directly under the leadership of the SASAC, 6,370 have immediate family members who live overseas or hold foreign passports. In Guangzhou, of approximately 1,000 corruption cases under investigation in recent years, half have occurred in SOEs, and of those who escaped overseas with foreign assets, 70 per cent were from SOEs and central financial institutions.⁸⁰ Li Chengyan 李成言, director of the Governance Studies Center of Peking University, recently told the Chinese media that "the large scale of capital outflow by corrupt officials shows that these CCP leaders know better than anyone else that the so-called China model (the CCP's resilient authoritarianism) is false – one that is not sustainable."⁸¹

Despite the fact that the dismissal of Bo Xilai can be seen as an important move in the right direction, this dramatic incident has nevertheless damaged the reputation of the CCP leadership. The troubles within the CCP leadership, however, should not necessarily be viewed as a problem for, or weakness of, the country. In his now well-known speech at the China Reform Forum on December 2011, Zhang Lifan 章立凡, a public intellectual in Beijing, argued that "China is not in danger, but the CCP is."⁸² In his view, many CCP members do not care whether the CCP will collapse, but are instead only concerned about the wellbeing of their own families. CCP leaders are also well prepared for their own future. Zhang Lifan stated bluntly: "if the next generation leaders do not

76 *Shijie ribao*, 3 May 2012, A4.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Shijie ribao*, 20 April 2012, A4.

79 *Shijie ribao*, 7 June 2012, A1.

80 *Shijie ribao*, 14 May 2012, A3.

81 *Shijie ribao*, 4 June 2012, A1.

82 Zhang Lifan's blog, post on 1 February 2012, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b86a2630100zhuv.html.

pursue political reforms in their first term, there is no point in doing so in their second term.” In his words, “China should witness either reforms in the first five years, or the end of the CCP in ten years.”⁸³

Recent demand for constitutionalism among liberal intellectuals and calls among some military officers for a “state army” rather than a “Party army” both constitute new challenges to CCP rule. As the CCP becomes weaker, many commentators in China have given more attention to the intriguing role of the PLA. Qian Liqun 钱理群, a distinguished scholar at Peking University, recently warned that “if the civilian leadership cannot form a strong coalition for political reforms, the young officers in the PLA will seize the moment. It would be a tragedy if the military presents the loudest noise for “democratic change” in China. That was the nightmare of 20th-century China, and it was also the grave lesson of the rise of Japanese militarism in the last century.”⁸⁴ Qian believes that the princelings within the PLA will bolster the army’s power in the upcoming Xi era, thereby increasing the risk of military interference in domestic politics.

Qian’s worries were reinforced by recent remarks by Zhang Musheng 张木生, a well-known conservative scholar who has close ties with General Liu Yuan 刘源. General Liu is a princeling in the PLA, a controversial rising star in the military’s senior leadership who is the son of former PRC president Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇. Zhang made a controversial speech in which he argued that present-day China is ruled by some incompetent and weak leaders who have led the country into a social and political crisis. “The future generation of leaders,” in his words, “will not be like that!”⁸⁵

He Pin, a seasoned New York-based analyst of Chinese elite politics, is doubtful of scenarios that predict a military takeover or chaos in the country. He believes that the “possibility for chaos in China is low for four reasons: 1) there are no strong region-based military warlords; 2) with the exception of a few ethnic regions, there is an absence of major regional conflict over resources; 3) the new leadership will most likely promote the economic integration of the country; and 4) in terms of the international environment, foreign powers do not want chaos in China.”⁸⁶

The fact that the Bo crisis has hit the CCP leadership more severely than it has affected the Chinese economy reflects the maturity of Chinese society and the strength of the country as a whole. China is not in decline, and is certainly not heading toward a collapse. One should not lose the big picture that China is on a historical rise, although this rise is unlikely to be strictly linear due to all of the daunting challenges – socio-economic, political, environmental, demographic and in the realm of foreign policy.

China’s upcoming transition to a more accountable, more representative and less corrupt political system, driven primarily by an on-going legitimacy crisis,

83 *Ibid.*

84 Qian 2012.

85 *Ibid.*

86 He Pin 2012, 186–87.

will not be easy. But the Chinese public's shared perception of China's rise on the world stage and all of the reform-era socio-economic developments that contribute to the country's national resilience (not the CCP's resilient authoritarianism) may make China's political transformation different from the experiences of the former Soviet Union, the Eastern bloc communist states and the "Arab Awakening" countries.

Despite a recent slowdown in China's breakneck economic growth, the country will likely continue to be one of the world's fast-growing economies for the next decade and beyond due to a combination of factors. These include the country's solid industrial foundation, its newly built world-class infrastructure, high rates of investment and savings, the continuing strong input of foreign direct investment, an impressive amount of foreign reserves, a large domestic market, human resource advantages, growing entrepreneurship and last but certainly not least the country's commitment to transitioning toward a domestic, demand-driven, and environmentally friendly mode of economic growth.⁸⁷ On top of that, the Chinese people who have created an economic miracle are unlikely to stop just at the gate of political democracy.

Final Thoughts

From a broader perspective, although these three shifts of power are the cause of some tension in the governance of the country and create a sense of uncertainty, they can be considered as very encouraging and positive developments for China. Factional checks and balances within the CCP leadership, dynamic interest groups – especially the increasingly important role of the middle class – and the widely shared perception of a rising power on the world stage and the public confidence this has engendered may all prove to be important factors in an eventual transition to democracy.

For the near future, the focus of China analysts should not only be on whether the CCP leadership uses proper legal procedures to deal with the Bo Xilai case, but also whether the leadership can seize the opportunity to reach a new consensus and seriously pursue political reforms. It is clearer today than perhaps any time during the reform era that the CCP's "authoritarian resilience," both conceptually and empirically, is a stagnant system because of its resistance to a democratic transition.

If the CCP wants to regain the public's confidence and avoid a bottom-up revolution, it must embrace genuine systematic democratic change in the country. The following profound transformations need to be made. First, in addition to handling the Bo case through established legal mechanisms, a call for legal reforms – including judiciary reform, the rule of law and constitutionalism – will become very important.⁸⁸ This could be a wonderful opportunity for liberal

⁸⁷ For more discussion of China's economic forecast, see Hu Angang 2011.

⁸⁸ For a detailed discussion of recent public and intellectual demand for constitutionalism, see He Weifang 2012. Also see Peerenboom 2002, Li and Jordan 2009; Wishik 2012.

leaders, and to a certain extent all leaders, to realize that legal reform is the best way to protect themselves in a country that still lacks the rule of law. It will take many years and even decades for China to fully build a constitutional system, but the ideological, political and legal statement that the Party should be under, rather than above, the constitution should be made sooner.

Second, the CCP should pursue bolder intra-Party elections, which could involve voting as a means of assigning leadership positions. For example, to select the members of the next Politburo Standing Committee, the CCP could put ten or eleven candidates on a ballot and have the Central Committee select nine of them, or have eight or nine candidates if the PSC changes to seven seats. This kind of “more candidates than seats” election (*cha'e xuanju* 差额选举) at the top level of leadership should be institutionalized immediately to bring a much-needed new source of legitimacy to the Party.

Third, media regulation is also in urgent need of reform. China has entered a “season of rumours,” and social media has become so powerful that Chinese authorities often shut down domestic micro-blogging services. This is not an effective way to run the country (especially when China is supposed to have an innovation-driven economy). The reason people go to social media for news is that the mainstream media does not tell them much. Thus, the way to avoid the sensationalism produced by social media is to open up the mainstream media. This is not only in the interest of liberal intellectuals, but the Chinese leaders themselves. The more these sensational stories are suppressed, the more powerful they become. Ten years of commercialization of the Chinese media have already prepared Chinese journalists to pursue freedom of press. The on-going revolutionary change in social media and telecommunications will make media freedom a necessity rather than a choice.

It would be intellectually and politically naïve to believe that Bo’s downfall will only have positive ramifications and that nothing will go wrong in China. It is worth remembering, however, that the assassination of a Taiwanese writer by agents of Taiwan’s Nationalist Party helped trigger the island’s transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the mid-1980s. Similarly, the CCP must now either make changes to be on the right side of history or be left behind. From a broader perspective, weak leaders, weak government and weak Party are not trends that are unique to China; they are common challenges in today’s world. Welcome, China, to the 21st century!

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