

civil society

The social space outside the state occupied by voluntary associations based on shared interests, for example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, labor unions, and community groups. Civil society is often seen as an important part of democracy.

One of the most important political trends in China has been the resurgence of **civil society**, a sphere of independent public life and citizen association, which, if allowed to thrive and expand, could provide fertile soil for future democratization. The development of civil society among workers in Poland and intellectuals in Czechoslovakia, for example, played an important role in the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe in the late 1980s by weakening the critical underpinnings of party-state control.

The Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989 reflected the stirrings of civil society in post-Mao China. But the brutal crushing of that movement showed the CCP's determination to thwart its growth before it could seriously contest the party's authority. But as economic modernization and social liberalization have deepened in the PRC, civil society has begun to stir again. Some stirrings, like the Falun Gong movement, have met with vicious repression by the party-state. But others, such as the proliferation and growing influence of nongovernmental organizations that deal with *non-political* matters such as the environment, have been encouraged by the authorities. Academic journals and conferences have recently had surprisingly open, if tentative, discussions about future political options for China, including multiparty democracy.

At some point, the leaders of the CCP will face the fundamental dilemma of whether to accommodate or, as they have done so often in the past, suppress organizations, individuals, and ideas that question the principle of party leadership. Accommodation would require the party-state to cede some of its control over society and allow more meaningful citizen representation and participation. But repression would likely derail the country's economic dynamism and could have terrible costs for China.

Chinese Politics in Comparative Perspective

China as a Communist Party-State

The fact that the Chinese Communists won power through an indigenous revolution with widespread popular backing and did not depend on foreign military support for their victory sets China apart from the situation of most of the now-deposed East-Central European communist parties. Despite some very serious mistakes over the six decades of its rule in China, the CCP still has a deep reservoir of historical legitimacy among large segments of the population.

The PRC has also been able to avoid the kind of economic crises that greatly weakened other communist systems, including the Soviet Union, through its successful market reforms and the rapidly rising living standard of most of the Chinese people. CCP leaders believe that one of the biggest mistakes made by the last Soviet communist party chief, Mikhail Gorbachev, was that he went too far with political reform and not far enough with economic change, and they are convinced that their reverse formula is a key reason that they have not suffered the same fate.

But China also has much in common with other communist party-states past and present, including some of the basic features of a totalitarian political system. **Totalitarianism** (a term also applied to fascist regimes such as Nazi Germany) describes a system in which the ruling party prohibits all forms of meaningful political opposition and dissent, insists on obedience to a single state-determined ideology, and enforces its rule through coercion and terror. Such regimes also seek to bring all spheres of public activity (including the economy and culture) and even many parts of

totalitarianism

A political system in which the state attempts to exercise total control over all aspects of public and private life, including the economy, culture, education, and social organizations, through an integrated system of ideological, economic, and political control. Totalitarian states rely on extensive coercion, including terror, as a means to exercise power.

its citizens' private lives (including reproduction) under the total control of the party-state in the effort to modernize the country and, indeed, to transform human nature.

China is much less totalitarian than it was during the Maoist era. In fact, the CCP appears to be trying to save communist rule in China by moderating or abandoning many of its totalitarian features. To promote economic development, the CCP has relaxed its grip on many areas of life. Citizens can generally pursue their interests without interference by the party-state as long as they avoid sensitive political issues.

The PRC is now a "consultative authoritarian regime" that "increasingly recognizes the need to obtain information, advice, and support from key sectors of the population, but insists on suppressing dissent ... and maintaining ultimate political power in the hands of the Party."²³ This regime has shown remarkable adaptability that so far has allowed it to both carry out bold economic reform and sustain a dictatorial political system.

China as a Third World State

The development of the PRC raises many issues about the role of the state in governing the economy. It also provides an interesting comparative perspective on the complex and much-debated relationship between economic and political change in the Third World.

When the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, China was a desperately poor country, with an economy devastated by a century of civil strife and world war. It was also in a weak and subordinate position in the post-World War II international order. Measured against this starting point, the PRC has made remarkable progress in improving the wellbeing of its citizens, building a strong state, and enhancing the country's global role.

Why has China been more successful than so many other nations in meeting some of the major challenges of development? Those with political power in the Third World have often served narrow class or foreign interests more than the national interest. The result is that governments of many developing countries have become **predatory states** that prey on their people and the nation's resources to enrich the few at the expense of the many. They become defenders of a status quo built on extensive inequality and poverty rather than agents of needed change. In contrast, the PRC's recent rulers have been quite successful in creating a **developmental state**, in which government power and public policy are used effectively to promote national economic growth. In this very important way, China has become a leader among developing nations.

But, in an equally important way, China is lagging behind many other countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Whereas much of the Third World has been heading towards democracy, the PRC has stood firm against that wave of democratization. According to the 2010 edition of the annual Democracy Index produced by the research staff of the highly respected magazine, *The Economist*, China ranked 136 out of 167 countries in the world according to a survey that uses a variety of measures, including the fairness of elections, political participation, and civil liberties.²⁴

There is a sharp and disturbing contrast between the harsh political rule of the Chinese communist party-state and its remarkable accomplishments in improving the material lives of the Chinese people. This contrast is at the heart of what one journalist called the "riddle of China" today, where the government often fights disease "as aggressively as it attacks dissent. It inoculates infants with the same fervor with which it arrests its critics. Partly as a result, a baby born in Shanghai now has a longer life expectancy than a baby born in New York City."²⁵

predatory state

A state in which those with political power prey on the people and the nation's resources to enrich themselves rather than using their power to promote national development. Contrast with developmental state.

developmental state

A **nation-state** in which the government carries out policies that effectively promote national economic growth.

This “riddle” makes it difficult to settle on a clear evaluation of the overall record of communist rule in China, particularly in the post-Mao era. It also makes it hard to predict the political future of the PRC, since the regime’s economic achievements may well provide it with the support, or at least compliance of its citizens, it needs to stay in power despite its deep political shortcomings.

The CCP’s tough stance on political reform is in large part based on its desire for self-preservation. But in keeping firm control on political life while allowing the country to open up in other important ways, Chinese Communist Party leaders also believe they are wisely following the model of development pioneered by the newly industrializing countries (NICs) of East Asia such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

The lesson that the CCP draws from the NIC experience is that only a strong government can provide the political stability and social peace required for rapid economic growth. According to this view, democracy—with its open debates about national priorities, political parties contesting for power, and interest groups squabbling over how to divide the economic pie—is a recipe for chaos, particularly in a huge and still relatively poor country.

But another of the lessons from the East Asian NICs—one that most Chinese leaders have been reluctant to acknowledge—is that economic development, social modernization, and global integration also create powerful pressures for political change from below and abroad. In both Taiwan and South Korea, authoritarian governments that had presided over economic miracles in the 1960s and 1970s gave way in the 1980s and 1990s to democracy. China’s leaders look approvingly on the Singapore model of development with its long-lasting combination of “soft authoritarianism” and highly developed modern economy. But that city-state has a population of just 5 million (about 300 times smaller than the PRC) and an area 1/14,000th the size of China.

China is in the early to middle stages of a period of growth and modernization that are likely to lead it to NIC status within two or three decades. But in terms of the extent of industrialization, per capita income, the strength of the private sector of the economy, and the size of the middle and professional classes, China’s level of development is still far below the level at which democracy succeeded in Taiwan and South Korea. Before concluding that China’s communist rulers will soon yield to the forces of modernization, it is important to remember that “authoritarian governments in East Asia pursued market-driven economic growth for decades without relaxing their hold on political power.”²⁶

Economic reform in China has already created social groups at home and opened up the country to ideas from abroad that are likely to grow as sources of pressure for more and faster political change. And the experiences of many developing countries suggest that such pressures will intensify as the economy and society continue to modernize. Therefore, at some point in the not-too-distant future, the Chinese Communist Party is likely to again face the challenge of the democratic idea. How China’s new generation of leaders responds to this challenge is perhaps the most important and uncertain question about Chinese politics in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Summary

A majority of China’s population still lives in the rural areas, and what happens there will greatly influence the country’s political future. Rapid economic development has created other major challenges, including growing inequalities, rising unemployment, deteriorating public services, and pervasive corruption. The CCP is also very likely to

face increasing demands for a political voice from different sectors of society as its citizens become more prosperous, well-educated, and worldly. In comparative perspective, China has proven more economically successful and politically adaptable than other communist party-states, including the Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991. China has also been much more successful than most other developing countries in promoting economic growth, but so far has not been part of the wave of democratization that has spread to so many other parts of the world.

Key Terms

autonomous region	iron rice bowl	People's Liberation Army (PLA)
guerrilla warfare	floating population	Central Military Commission (CMC)
centrally planned economy	National Party Congress	<i>guanxi</i>
socialism	Central Committee	socialist democracy
collectivization	Politburo	nationalism
communism	Standing Committee	mass organizations
technocrats	general secretary	civil society
communist party-states	National People's Congress (NPC)	totalitarianism
state-owned enterprises (SOEs)	State Council	predatory state
socialist market economy	cadre	developmental state
household responsibility system	<i>nomenklatura</i>	

Suggested Readings

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Suggested Websites

China Politics Links

<http://www.wellesley.edu/Polisci/wj/chinesepolitics/>

The Central Government of the People's Republic of
China

<http://www.gov.cn/english/>

China in the News

<http://chinapoliticsnews.blogspot.com/>

United States Department of State

<http://www.state.gov/p/eap/ci/ch/>

The Jamestown Foundation China Brief:

<http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/>

Hoover Institution China Leadership Monitor

[http://www.hoover.org/publications/
china-leadership-monitor](http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor)

University of California at Berkeley, China Digital
Times

<http://chinadigitaltimes.net/>