
China After Deng: The Prospects for Polycentrism and Democratization

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In pluralist political systems, the death of one leader may not matter much because there are effective mechanisms for succession, but in a highly personalized, uninstitutionalized, and consequently uncertain political system like China, the death of a leader matters a great deal. Deng Xiaoping has been so much both the tangible manifestation of China's revolutionary past and the prime proponent of its modernizing future that his death will present the People's Republic of China (PRC) with a major challenge.

The reform era initiated by Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is full of fundamental paradoxes. The CCP has started a process of change that will ultimately undermine its own position: it has set in motion processes it needs to control, but ultimately cannot. If it tries to stop these processes, then it will bring political conflict to a head sooner rather than later. Though in the short term the CCP could undoubtedly bring the gradual processes of transition to a halt, it would just as undoubtedly jeopardize its own position: its legitimacy would be irreparably damaged. However, if the CCP does not also successfully manage the transition it has set in motion, then the situation in general may easily become totally ungovernable, and once again its own position would be jeopardized. In short, though a CCP may survive in one form or another, there is no future for the CCP of the past and the political system it created: the structural imperatives for change are just too great.

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Though there might be a conservative backlash in the short term—now or within the next few years—the longer term prospects are for continuing change: polycentrism, regionalism, and possibly even some form of democratization.

The Precedents

Deng Xiaoping has been central to China's reform process since the mid-1970s when he first raised the possibility of radical changes to the Maoist agenda. Though he is no original thinker, and though one of his great strengths is his ability to involve others, his role in the reform era has probably been greater than that of any other single individual. His background in the politics of both the PRC and the CCP put him in a unique position to ensure the introduction of long-planned and hoped-for reforms. Deng is seen as having been everywhere and done everything, and if not quite that, then at least everywhere and everything of importance in the development of the CCP. This position has enabled him not only to be a main initiator of reform, but also to present himself and his actions as in defense of the CCP and communism. His death, therefore, will present the CCP with further problems of readjustment and modernization as it struggles to come to terms with the results of its own policies and the changing environment.

The experience of modernization elsewhere in the world and throughout history has been that social dislocation and political change are necessary consequences. The key questions are not whether there will be difficulties, but of what kind, and with what consequences. In China's case the rapid pace of change and high economic growth rates since 1978 have probably magnified many of the problems that have resulted. In particular, the transition from a command towards a market economy and the movement of large numbers of economic migrants within the country—both within a relatively short period of time—have created additional strains. By the same token, China's experience of problems in the present and immediate future does not necessarily indicate an end to political stability or the disintegration of an ordered society.

China remains a pre-modern political system. The very fact that the death of Deng Xiaoping leads to so much thought about the future of the PRC and the capacity for survival of the CCP is proof enough of that. It is Deng's political persona that is seen as having driven the reform process for much of the time since 1978, just as it has been Deng's personal

authority that has soothed the more conservative-minded by assuring them that change has been minimal and will remain so.

The Future

The enormity of the challenges China faces suggests an uneasy future. Though economic collapse and political chaos are unlikely following the death of Deng, these potentialities cannot self-evidently be dismissed as of no concern. The rapidity of events in and after 1989 in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe seem to offer two instructive lessons to the understanding of China without Deng Xiaoping. The first is to question the prospects for both national unity and the continued position of the CCP. The second is more generally to underline the difficulties of prediction—most commentators were taken aback by the scale and speed of imploding communism. However, the longer-term processes of change already underway in China and the contrast to other historical examples—the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as well as the evolution of authoritarian capitalism in East Asia—suggest that prediction may be on surer ground.

Political disintegration along the lines of a Soviet Union or Yugoslavia is generally unlikely. However, China is already characterized by a high degree of regionalism that has dramatically altered the workings of its political system and is coming to influence domestic political style. National unity may not be in question but China is becoming increasingly polycentrist. Though this is clearly neither political disintegration nor imploding communism, it is likely to result in even more highly localized politics, and as part of that process the CCP, too, is becoming localized.

The CCP has mortgaged its future on the ability to deliver economic growth and China's modernization. However, continued economic growth depends on decentralization, the absence of central control, and a lack of CCP interference, both nationally and locally. The future political system will build on the resources and linkages of the CCP and the party-state. It may even emerge with no change of names or cries of revolution, and maintain the political myths and traditions of the PRC since 1949. However, CCP or not, China is almost certain to be a more diverse and loosely bound political union.

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The experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe appears to present severe challenges to China's political future. However, it is far from clear that the parallels between China and the former Soviet Union are exact enough to justify predictions of either the implosion of communist rule or the disintegration of the unified state. Although the political structures of the PRC were established along the line of the Soviet Union's during the early 1950s, the parallels end there. The population of the USSR was more urbanized, intellectualized and more accustomed to mass politics. Unlike its Soviet counterpart, the CCP came to power through a protracted process of war and civil war based on mass mobilization. While that contrast does not guarantee the CCP wide popular support, it does provide the opportunity for it, particularly in North China, where its roots run deep.

Moreover, China's contemporary political culture differs in two important respects from that which characterized the former communist party states of Europe and the Soviet Union. The first is that the CCP has presided over a rapidly growing economy. There has been a rising standard of living, not just since 1978, but over the whole period of the People's Republic of China. The second is that, with only two or three exceptions, there are few regional challenges within China to the "state idea" of China as a whole. Unlike the USSR or Yugoslavia, the unity of the state has a long history. Its provinces have been determined by the circulation of people, goods, and ideas in each locality over some two thousand years—not by some twentieth century notion of nationalism and administrative fiat. The exceptions—Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia—are precisely those non-Han areas with their own independent traditions which do not share China's "state idea."

China's political economy changed dramatically from 1979 to 1982. In those years, through sheer political will, the leaders of the CCP forced through a major reform that later defeated their communist counterparts in Europe and the Soviet Union. They removed the stranglehold of heavy industry on the economy by diverting sufficient investment into light and consumer industry. The amount was not fantastically large (it is estimated at only some 3 to 4 percent of GNP), but it has significantly influenced elite-level politics, altered the trajectory of national economic planning, and resulted in the development of a consumer society with all the attendant political as well as social and economic implications.

However, this is not to say that China has solved all the problems of the transition from state socialism, or other problems not faced in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the very success of economic growth creates problems not only by creating a revolution of rising expectations, but also because economic growth in China has come

about through diversity and has been sustained by allowing the market to operate freely rather than through government action, at any level. There appears to be a crucial disparity between economic growth and the political system which still emphasizes, at least formally, centralization, ideological conformity, and the CCP's control of certainty.

It is from such perspectives that the experience of other East Asian societies may be of assistance. In general, modernization in East Asia can be regarded as a form of late capitalist development in which—as with Germany and Japan in the nineteenth century—the state plays a leading role. Late developers have the obvious added advantages of being able to draw on the examples and experiences of their predecessors. They do not need, initially, to develop their own technologies, for, particularly if their economies are sufficiently internationalized, technology can be imported. In addition, development strategies focus on production for the export market with appropriate measures of protectionism.

Economic growth is linked inextricably with an authoritarian political system which is able to direct the mobilization of resources to the national goal of modernization. As the economy develops and social complexity increases, the state has to adapt in order to internalize the new social forces it creates. However, the experiences of South Korea, Taiwan, and even Japan suggest that such transformations of regime can occur peacefully, in contrast to the violent nineteenth century revolutions that marked the political economy of change in Western Europe. It is even arguable in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan that regime change has occurred without fundamentally threatening the state and has left its authoritarianism intact.

The usefulness of regarding China as an example of East Asian late capitalism is relatively obvious, not least to the leadership of the CCP. As already noted, since the late 1980s the CCP has promoted an image of China precisely in that mold, with an emphasis on successful economic modernization and authoritarianism as somehow more “Chinese” than the chaos and lack of social harmony that is bound to result from Western-imported democracy. Newspaper and journal articles, as well as films and television programs, have internalized the message to a high degree, and there can be little doubt that such instinctively reactive nationalism strikes strong popular resonances.

Throughout the twentieth century those seeking change in China have articulated a desire for a fundamentally Chinese modernization. For many, the CCP still represents the best hope of achieving that nationalist goal. Even for those who, like their earlier counterparts in the Soviet Union and the former communist party states of Eastern Europe, have

become totally disillusioned with its activities and only provide support out of cynicism or an instinct for survival, the CCP may still represent the best hope for maintaining national unity or preventing the total breakdown of law and order.

From the perspective of East Asian late capitalism it seems possible that the PRC's political future might involve a slow and gradual transformation in a similar fashion to the development of politics in Taiwan and South Korea. Were this to be the case, the state's dominance of society and its leading position in the economy is likely to remain a central characteristic of its political economy. Its political institutions are likely to be dominated by the nexus of relationships described by business, bureaucracy, and politicians, and their access to wealth, power, and status. Under those conditions, the number of political parties engaged in electoral competition hardly impinges on the range of strategic choices available. China would thus remain dominated either by the CCP or some successor institution which provided the essential framework for the exercise of economic as well as political power. The only problem with such a vision of the future is that while something similar may occur in any given locality, the diffusion of state power is already such that China is more likely to be compared to a series of Taiwans or South Koreas rather than a single, essentially centralized political system.

China's experience is significantly different from its East Asian late capitalist neighbors in ways that may well influence the political consequences of social and economic change, not only domestically, but also internationally. Its size is a relatively obvious, but frequently underestimated difference. China massive size relative to other states has always created different problems for political control and economic direction. Even during the period of greatest Soviet influence, China had a higher degree of decentralization: policies were rarely set centrally with no room for local adaptation. Economic regionalism, entailing a high degree of local variation in national policy and even local regulation, is well developed in the south and east and has to increase with economic growth.

At the same time, the decentralization of both economic management and government has been matched to some extent by the evolution of the CCP's activities. CCP organization is now extremely localized, though it is a moot point whether its real strength locally is as much political as it is social. One reason the new industrialists and entrepreneurs remain keen to join is the functioning of the local CCP as a meeting point of social and economic rather than political ends.

China's size and regionalism are also significant because of the roles their repercussions consequently play in East Asia. China is so big

that only a relatively small amount of growth, such as that which occurred during the 1980s, has created a huge magnet of attraction for investment in the region that adds an extra dimension to international relations in East Asia. Moreover, the economic regions that have developed within the PRC are also becoming increasingly economically integrated with other specific parts of the East Asia region. Thus, Guangdong should perhaps for some time have been regarded as Greater Hong Kong; Taiwan has provided for almost three quarters of Fujian's industrial development; Japanese and Taiwanese investors are particularly active in Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu Provinces; and Korean involvement is significant in both Shandong and northeast China.

The Overseas Chinese are the major vehicle for the PRC's economic integration with East Asia, and the existence of that diaspora marks a further significant difference from other examples of East Asian late capitalism. There are some 55 million ethnic Chinese plus an additional unknown number of people of Chinese descent throughout the Asia Pacific region. The existence of Taiwan and Hong Kong has clearly influenced the way the PRC's economy has developed, and it is likely to play a central role in the future of domestic as well as international politics. Of course Hong Kong will become part of the PRC in 1997, but in the meantime the process of adaptation continues as much from the PRC side as from the Hong Kong side. In addition, meeting the challenge presented by both Hong Kong and Taiwan is something that concerns the CCP and that has generally driven change in the PRC since the late 1980s. An obvious example is the way the popular music scene has been drastically liberalized through the introduction of Hong Kong "Canto-pop" and Taiwanese popular music.

There is, then, not only nationalism, but also supernationalism at the heart of China's economic growth and political transformation. One of the great ironies in the CCP's international stance after June 1989 was that at the same time that it was protesting loudly about "harmful" Western cultural influences fomenting rebellion in China, it was permitting an influx of the kinds of popular music it would previously not have permitted. In fact, 1989 marked a turning point in the PRC's policies towards East and Southeast Asia, which further increased the involvement in China of Overseas Chinese from those communities. In the aftermath of Western reaction to its suppression of the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, the PRC quickly moved to resolve its outstanding diplomatic problems in the region, enabling the not inconsiderable Chinese business communities of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore to invest in, and trade with, China. China's surge to economic superpower status may have started with the involvement of Hong Kong

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and Taiwan on the mainland in 1987, but it started to take off with the economic opportunities presented in the second half of 1989.

The impact of this supernationalism on China's politics are far from certain, not least because they are not solely dependent on developments within the borders of the PRC. Within China the impact of decentralization, regionalism, and international economic integration all seem

to indicate the greater diffusion of political power in the absence of strong leadership. Increased economic interaction and a domestic division of labor might strengthen economic integration and political unity. However, at present the pattern of economic development suggests the opposite. Interprovincial trade appears to have been falling for some time, though interprovincial investment clearly has not. If anything through international economic integration—specific to each economic region—China's provinces are becoming more rather than less autonomous, at least in relation to central government. On the surface an effective federalism seems a distinct possibility in practice, though not in name or law not least because of the absence of a tradition of a rule of law. Chinese culture has long been polycentric; it was only the rigid doctrine of conformity of the late Qing Empire and the state under Mao Zedong that sought to portray its centralist aspects. However, the problems with such arguments is that there are no obvious mechanisms that will permit the CCP as it is currently constructed to manage such a transformation.

Agents of Change

Consideration of the long-term trends in China's development may provide a somewhat misleading image of stability. Modernization has rarely if ever proved an even or planned process, and already as a result of its boom-bust cycles during the 1980s and the political consequences China has proved that it is to be no exception. Rapid economic transformation has been accompanied by social dislocation and political uncertainty, which may have a disproportionate effect on China's emergent politics, particularly in the short term.

The uncertainties of the rapidly changing environment are likely to be magnified by the death of Deng Xiaoping. Deng may hold no formal position of power in the structures of the CCP or the state, but he remains

the undisputed “paramount leader” of China. Even in highly institutionalized political systems, uncertainties about leadership may destabilize politics. In political systems, such as that of the PRC, where politics seem determined by personalities, the illness, aging, or death of the current leadership imposes fairly obvious strains on political stability.

Despite his role as part of a collective leadership, despite the redefinition of politics so that government is reduced in scale and range, and despite the changing CCP role in the direction of society, Deng has come to play a central role in the political system. His death will remove the single most important figure in China’s politics, and may thus be a catalyst for political change. Since the mid-1980s he has simultaneously been the main defender of the communist party state and the prime generator of sustained reform. It is unlikely that any other single person could maintain close associations with all the different interests—historical as well as organizational and political—that comprise the CCP in quite the way that Deng did.

Those who populate the party-state system remain the key, if not the only, organized agents of political change. However, their political attitudes and behavior may be determined as much by their practical position and function in the party-state system as by any allegiance to a transcendent notion of the CCP or the PRC. They may be in the Party, but their purpose is more akin to members of a club who join to network and gather influence—not as in the past when the CCP was itself the framework of all power. Without exaggerating their abilities the leading officials see both the need to accommodate China’s new social forces and to learn from the lessons of the collapse of communist rule in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In the provinces the political strategies of local leaders have developed in a number of directions, not least to cover a range of eventualities. They maintain close links with central government and the CCP organization in Beijing particularly for the short term, and they are busy preparing their own broader bases of support in their home province for the long term. Their counterparts in Eastern Europe placed themselves at the head of movements for radical change when faced by major economic problems and surrounded by the apparent attractions of democracy. However, the current provincial leadership faces different socio-economic circumstances and is surrounded by a political discourse in East and Southeast Asia that stresses the synergy between economic growth and authoritarianism. From a provincial perspective the strategy is obvious: it is not a case of Taiwan or South Korea being equivalent to China, but rather one of Taiwan or South Korea being equivalent to Guangdong or Shanxi or Shandong.

As elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, the military may come to play a crucial role in the transformation of China's politics. However, here too there is uncertainty, not least because the PLA is not a single political actor. It might be imagined that with the reform era and the depoliticization of other aspects of state activity, the PLA would follow suit, concentrating on becoming a more professionalized standing army and withdrawing from civilian affairs, yet remaining as the final arbiter and guarantor of state power.

It is certainly the case that the PLA leadership lobbied hard for its increased professionalization and a concomitant modernization of its weaponry since the mid-1970s. However, it is far from clear that the PLA has completely withdrawn from civilian affairs even though its involvement has changed. Charged with existing in a market-oriented economy, the PLA, or rather its various constituent units, have established a large number of enterprises, many of which have only a very tenuous relationship to military activities. PLA unit budgets are now drafted on the

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assumption that a certain percentage of funds and resources will be generated by commercial and economic activities.

The extent to which the PLA's economic activities may jeopardize or otherwise influence its role as a major organizational support of the party-state is far from clear. The possibility exists

that parts of the PLA will still not be able to stand outside any possible civilian conflict or dispute and may, to the contrary, be forced to intervene either partially or in its own interests. Thus, for example, it would appear that military units have been mobilized to almost purely economic ends during the various "commodity wars" that have developed since the mid-1980s. Economic competition with other non-military enterprises has already led PLA units in Guangdong, where roughly half of all the PLA's non-military economic enterprises are physically located, into more direct forms of confrontation.

Outside the formal party-state system, which includes the PLA, there is opposition to the CCP and its policies, but accommodation is an inherent part of political life not just for business people but even for those who seek more radical political change. On the whole, both the CCP and those seeking radical reform share, to a remarkable extent, a fear of social disorder. There is a common recognition that too rapid political change might jeopardize the gains in the standard of living made during the reform era.

The events of 1989 alienated intellectuals and drove many into

exile, where they remain. Those who were involved in the movement for reform saw themselves as within the system rather than opposed to it root and branch; that position remains an unreconciled matter of some debate among those now in exile. It is possible that the opposition in exile may develop new ideas and even the organizational momentum to represent a significant threat to the CCP at some point in the future. However, at present they face enormous structural problems. They are divided, physically separate, and disparate. They are, fundamentally, a movement of intellectuals, and while that leads to a certain influence, it also remains a check on their development as a mass movement. Moreover, they are outside China and thus somewhat tainted and less powerful in terms of their need to appeal to reactive nationalism.

Chinese intellectuals have flirted with Western ideas of democracy since the end of the nineteenth century, but it could not be said that notions of democracy or even civil society have developed strong foundations. For the most part when democracy was spoken of in the PRC before 1989, the meaning was either that of "socialist democracy" (i.e. perfecting state socialism) or that of the "small democracies" (i.e. freedom of choice in work, home, and marriage). Despite such symbolism as the "Goddess of Democracy" modeled on the Statue of Liberty which appeared in Tiananmen Square in May, the demonstrations of 1989 did little to directly develop a new discourse or build towards civil society. However, the 1989 movement could now develop its own mythology which may well play a role in China's political future. There is a foundation for consciousness of democracy that did not exist before and which may develop, particularly with increased exposure to the rest of the world.

Given the role of the party-state in the genesis of new patterns of economic development, it would be remarkable to find the new entrepreneurs generated by China's growth since the late 1970s articulating any demand for regime change of any kind, let alone a Western-style democracy, and there is no evidence to suggest that is the case. On the contrary, at this stage—as one might expect with a continually rising market—most of the energy of the new entrepreneurs is concentrated elsewhere. On the other hand, greater political activism might follow from economic difficulties or renewed political interference. Their accommodation has been bought with the promise and practice of economic freedom, not by political commitment.

The death of Deng Xiaoping may not immediately plunge the PRC into either crisis or radical transformation. However, the signs for the future of the CCP would all seem to point in one direction. Decentralization, regionalism, economic growth, and international integration are all

set to increasingly challenge its claims to leadership. It can only survive in its dominant position if it ceases to be the CCP and redefines a role for itself based on an acceptance of high degrees of diversity and uncertainty.

There can be little doubt that the CCP is currently undergoing considerable transformation. The new economic elites who have been recruited in the era of reform have radically different perspectives on life and on politics than their predecessors. Though they may be only too willing to reach accommodations with the current party-state, they are also part of a process which is changing it from within. There can also be little doubt that there are those within the ranks of the CCP who see the direction of the structural imperatives for change. However, the CCP remains dominated at the highest levels by a relatively small group of people and their families with no such perception of the need for fundamental change. 