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# CHANGE AND PROSPECT OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

## Socio-Economic Development as Result of Political Action

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After the death of Mao Zedong and the official termination of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 China entered the post-Mao era, and since the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee in 1978 the CCP embarked on its "reform" which signalled the arrival of the post-totalitarian stage. This entailed multiple changes in policy and institution which in turn led to further socio-economic-political transformation.

What is in stock for the future? What is the nature of the changes during the past 15 years: is it permanent and irreversible, or temporary and contingent? What are the likely scenarios in its future path of development? These are questions which intrigued both the general public and the academic community. Given the unpredictability of PRC politics, there are no ready made answers.

Before engaging in the analysis of changes in the PRC, it is important to realize: First, all the "reforms" and socioeconomic changes since 1978 have been initiated by the party-state and are results of political decisions made by the new paramount leader Deng Xiaoping with the support of top CCP leadership. The real motivation for "reform," whether social or economic, is to maintain the superordination of the party-state over society. Second, the pursuit of economic development, which has been emphasized since 1978 and was reaffirmed in 1987 at the CCP 13th Party Congress, is really a means towards the ultimate goal of reinforcing the rule of the party-state over the people. The purpose for fostering economic growth is to consolidate political authority and power of the core leadership. Any changes which implied or resulted in the diminution of the political authority of the political Center will provoke its resistance and lead to policy reversal. This is the major cause of recurring policy swings during the past 16 years. Whatever "reform" measure, which initially lead to the promotion of economic efficiency but later appear to challenge the political status of the power core elites, must be discarded in order to preserve the dominating status of the party. The ultimate goal of any reform measure is to ensure the dominating ruling status of the paramount leader and his colleagues of the party-state. This is the true essence of Deng's Four Cardinal Principles and "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Reform is the function (*yong*) in the service of the essence (*ti*) of party leadership.

From a more general perspective, contrary to the economic determinism of Marxism, the PRC provides the case where political action of the state is the most important factor in directing socio-economic changes. Of course, there will always be unintended social consequences due to latent functions of state initiated policies which would provoke corrective actions. These will, in turn, lead to further changes. Thus, as long as the basic state-superordination-over-society structural relation remain unchanged, socio-economic changes in China will still be outcomes of intended action initiated by the political leadership. Political decision making still rest securely in the hands of the top power elites, i.e. the paramount leader, the few gerontocrats and members of the Politburo Standing Committee.

From the establishment of the PRC in 1949 to 1978, the CCP under the leadership of Mao Zedong and his core colleagues had build up a political system in China which ensured the near total domination of the party-state over society. This system is characterized by a monistic and hierarchical structure with a high degree of power concentration, by absence of legal and social constraints on the exercise of that political power, and by a party's monopoly of control over all organizations and communication. Hence, the party-state has great capabilities in regulating almost all aspect of society. This resulted in a social system in which society is almost totally controlled by the state. If totalitarianism is defined as a special phase of a social system in which society is almost totally subordinated to the state, then the pre-1978 Chinese political system is indeed totalitarian (Fu 1993: chs. 11, 12, 13).

During the post-Mao era, due to a series of political action taken by the top leadership of the party-state and the cooperation of the people the totalitarian features underwent some far-reaching social changes. These changes demonstrate conclusively that totalitarian system is amenable to change. These changes in the PRC show under what conditions and through what processes a monolithic social order may be transformed into a more pluralistic one. Evidently, the assumption of the inherent static nature of totalitarianism is unwarranted.<sup>1</sup> In the real world, there is no unchanging social systems. Since 1978 the PRC started on its path toward its authoritarian stage.

1 The present author fails to see why the totalitarian model is necessarily static. Furthermore, the criticism of the use of this term as "ideological" seems to be itself ideologically motivated.

At the very start of the post-Mao era the new political leadership was confronted with a whole set of problems. These provided motivation for initiation of measures for change and reform. First, despite considerable economic growth and industrial development China had been experiencing very low level of consumption and long term poverty especially among the rural populace. From 1953 to 1978 total social (material) product increased at an annual rate over 7 per cent, but per capita consumption of grain and of light industrial products with agricultural raw material were virtually stagnant (Nolan and Dong 1990:8-12). Housing space per person did not increase at all, if not decreased. By 1979 average housing space per urban resident was 3 square meter (*Renmin Ribao*: 25 February 1992). Agricultural output per laborer rose only 5 per cent during the whole 25 years (Riskin 1987:271). There was wide spread poverty, especially in the rural region after more than twenty years of forced communization. If one uses 2,185 kcal per day as the poverty line, in 1979 no less than 31 per cent of Chinese rural population live in absolute poverty (World Bank 1986:30).

Second, many party veterans in the post-Mao leadership were victims themselves of the Cultural Revolution and knew the human toll of the incessant political movements initiated by Mao Zedong during the past 30 years (Fu 1993: chs. 14-16). The Great Leap Forward alone entailed the loss of more than 30 million lives (Fu 1993:304). The exact figure of victims of political persecution during the Mao era may never be known, but every Chinese has friends or relatives who had been persecuted. The rehabilitated veterans wanted to make sure that they themselves would not become again victims of political movements.

Third, after the death of Mao, in the wake of mass discontent expressed by the 1976 April Fourth Tiananmen Incident and the euphoria expressed by the general populace at the arrest of the "Gang of Four" the new leadership realized the deep social resentment against the Cultural Revolution and its associated Stalinist-Maoist policies. Despite outward tranquility the new leadership could detect the extreme frustration of the Chinese people which might broil in the open.

Since late 1976 the party-state relaxed its tight grip on the media, arts and literature. Since 1978 the new paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, and his top associates initiated a series of policies to consolidate their position and to remedy what they perceived as imperfections accumulated during the reign of Mao Zedong. Being victims themselves of persecution of the Cultural Revolution, they were motivated, or at least less inhibited, to reverse or mitigate certain extreme features of Mao's radical absolutism.



### PARTY-STATE INITIATED "REFORMS"

Since 1978 the party-state reversed many policies of the Mao era and launched institutional reforms in the economy, polity and other aspects of social life. The results show conclusively that the action of the state is the most important factor in effecting socio-economic changes.

#### Relaxation and Liberalization

The demise of the "Gang of Four" and the resultant enthusiastic popular response encouraged the new party-state leadership to relax its control over matters pertaining to arts, literature and the mass media. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution with priority placed on the drive for economic modernization, the new leadership decided to loosen its grip on ideological field and liberalize cultural policy. Never before since 1949 was the people given such latitudes in voicing their unrehearsed opinions in the public, such as their critical comments about Mao and his Stalinist styled political persecution and disastrous economic policies. It is fair to say that never before since the establishment of the PRC have the people felt so free from the threat of political crackdown.

The post-Mao party leadership announced that it will no longer engage primarily in constant class struggle nor initiate large-scale political movements. Victims of political persecution during past political movements were rehabilitated. In late 1978 the Center decided to rehabilitate the April 5 Tiananmen Incident of 1976, and to discard the "rightists" label of some half million victims of the Anti-rightist movement in 1957/8. In 1979 the label of "landlord" was discarded. Hundreds of thousands of falsely charged cases were overturned. Most of the prominent party leaders, who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, were rehabilitated, many posthumously like Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai and others. Staunch loyal Maoists of the "whateverist" persuasion were ridiculed and criticized.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1977-78 relaxation, musical works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, etc. were allowed to be performed, literary writings of Shakespeare, Dickens, Flaubert, Balzac, Heine,

2 The "whateverist" program is best expressed by a *Renmin Ribao* editorial: "We resolutely defend whatever policies Chairman Mao has formulated and unswervingly adhere to whatever instructions Chairman Mao has issued" (*Renmin Ribao*, 7 February 1977).

Tolstoy, Turgenev, etc. were reprinted, some social science departments such as sociology, political science, etc. were reestablished. There was also a surge of Chinese literary work in the form of short stories, poetry and filmscript. One literary genre was called "wounded literature" which refers to the deep moral wounds inflicted by Mao and the ultra-leftist policies. This was viewed favorably by the party establishment since it supported the position held by Deng Xiaoping and associates.

There was also more opening up to the outside world. More foreign tourists came and Chinese residents were no longer absolutely prohibited from having foreign contacts unsupervised by the party. Western publications, academic groups, ideas and information came in more freely than at any time during the Mao era.

Many young people responded warmly to the changed atmosphere of relaxation and liberalization. At first they openly articulated their demands for rehabilitation of persecuted party veterans including Deng Xiaoping and other victims of the Cultural Revolution, for the return of urban youth who were sent to the countryside, for normalcy in the education system, and for launching the four modernization. Their expression was openly displayed in the form of posters on the street walls in Beijing. These demands were resisted by the remaining Maoist "whateverists" who were still in power. Due to factional disputes between the "whateverists" and the once-persecuted party veterans these popular dissenting voices were not only tolerated but secretly encouraged by Deng's faction. The efforts of these young dissidents undoubtedly contributed to the victory of Deng Xiaoping's faction against the "whateverists." Yet, when the demands of these young dissidents turned to the demands for freedom of expression, free election, multi-party system and human rights, they overstepped the limit of toleration of Deng Xiaoping and associates. In the eyes of the latter these demands challenged their monopoly of power and political dominating status. Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed the official orthodoxy of party leadership in the form of the four Cardinal Principles. The arrests of Wei Jingsheng, Ren Wanding and others in the spring of 1979 signalled the first policy reversal in the post-Mao era. The Beijing Spring was to last for less than a year.

During the post-Mao period of relative relaxation and liberalization, the party-state still engaged in habitual efforts to maintain ideological orthodoxy. Liberalization would be followed by various form of suppression. Cyclic political swings became the norm with recurrent policy reversals. The 1981 anti-liberalization campaign was targeted at certain literary works for being too critical of the party or party officials, such as

*Bitter Love* by Bai Hua (1979). The discussion on humanism provoked a barrage of attacks against some more enlightened "neo-Marxist" writers by the orthodox ideologue during the 1983 anti-spiritual pollution. Though this campaign quickly subsided, it showed how easy it would be to turn the trend of liberalization. Later the 1987 anti-bourgeois liberalization gave way to the more drastic 1989 Tiananmen Massacre which demonstrated the over-optimism of the assertion that liberalization is irreversible.

### Economic Reform

Major economic reform measures fell generally into four categories: rural decollectivization, limited privatization, expansion of market mechanism and decentralization of economic management.

After the 3rd Plenum of the 11th CCP Central Committee in December 1978, the rural reform began with the gradual institution of household responsibility system which delegated management of farmland to individual households. By 1984 rural decollectivization had effectively dismantled the commune system which had tied the Chinese rural population firmly to the land as party-state serfs and kept them in collective poverty for more than twenty years. Measures initiated from the political superstructure transformed the relation of production, i.e. the economic base. Decollectivization provided great incentive for spurring the peasants productive efforts. Once the Chinese peasants were freed from some of the shackles imposed by the party-state, they were able to put more effort into agricultural production. The result was more than impressive. From 1978 to 1984, total agricultural output increased at an average annual rate of 7.7% (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:335). While more than 31% of rural population lived in absolute poverty in 1979, by 1982 that number dropped to 13% according to the World Bank estimate (World Bank 1986:30). The growth of collective enterprises managed by towns and townships relieved part of the surplus rural labor force and improved their living standard. In 1985 state procurement of agricultural products was greatly reduced.

Privatization has been mainly implemented in the service sector (restaurants, barbershops, retailers, etc.) which grew at a fast pace. By 1992 there were some 14 million private businesses employing some 23 million employees (*Renmin Ribao*: 30 October 1992). In the industrial sector privatization has also made some progress. In 1989 private enterprises accounted for less than 3.4% of the total industrial output (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:412), by 1992 that percentage increased to

13.5% (NCNA 24 February 1994; quoted in *Inside Mainland China*, vol. 16, no. 4, April 1994).

Decentralization of economic management conferred more autonomy to individual state run enterprises. More importantly, it led to a surge of collective businesses and enterprises which are no longer under strict centralized control. By 1990 employment in urban collective enterprises rose to 35.5 million (Gordon 1993:72). At the same time there was a dramatic increase in the number of collective enterprise in rural regions. This, in turn, caused a change in the employment pattern of the rural population. By the end of 1989 more than 20.75% of the total rural labor force, or some 85 million persons, worked no longer on the farmland but engaged in the industrial and service sector (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:115).

The loosening of price control and gradual decrease of central planning effected expansion of the market mechanism. Foreign trade was actively promoted and expanded from a total of US\$20.64 billion in 1978 to US\$135.7 billion in 1991 (Gordon 1993:73). The PRC economy has been gradually moving in the direction of integration with the world economy. China's economic performance has been quite impressive during the post-Mao economic reform period with average annual growth rate of material product at around 9% between 1978 to 1992.

### Political Reform

Having personal experience of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping and associate perceived some serious flaw in the political institution established under Mao's. They concluded the major issues were over-centralization of power and personalization of authority. In his important speech on political reform on 18 August 1980, Deng identified the major faults of the CCP political institution as "the phenomena of bureaucratism, of over-centralization of power, of patriarchalism, of life-time tenure of leading cadre position, and of various kinds of special privileges." He even went so far to say: "Stalin seriously destroyed the socialist legal system. Comrade Mao Zedong said such events could not have happened in Western countries like England, France or America. Although he recognized this problem, yet because he did not resolve issues in the leadership institution and other causes, these still led to the ten years catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution" (Deng Xiaoping 1983:280-302).

Some political reform measures planned and/or enacted are: retiring older cadres and promoting younger and better educated party member to



leadership position; streamlining of the bulky bureaucracy; promulgation of a civil code and a criminal code which were absent for 30 years from 1949 to 1979; separation of the functions of party and government; new election law of 1979 provided direct election to the county level people's congresses and more than one candidate per position.

Though there were many pronouncements about reform of political institution, actual action and results fell far short of expectation in glaring contrast with economic reform.

1. Retiring old cadre had been a very sluggish process resisted by retirees. The effort to raise the educational level of cadres bear different results. Enterprise managers became younger and better educated than government officials, who tended to be younger and better educated than party secretaries (Lee 1992; Blecher 1991). More importantly, the top octogenarian gerontocrats though formally retired are still the most powerful decision makers whose preferences often override the Politburo. Deinstitutionalization and personalization of authority did not seem to improve compared with the Mao era.

2. Streamlining the oversized bureaucracy produced an even bulkier and unwieldier party-state administration. While the number of party-state personnel increased 61% from 1952 to 1978 at an average annual rate of 1.85% (Blecher 1991:36), during the post-Mao reform years that number swelled from 4.67 million in 1978 to 10.22 million in 1989 (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:114), which more than doubled at an average annual growth rate of 7.38% (population annual growth rate was 1.3%).

3. For some 30 years PRC was ruled without a criminal code and a civil code. The promulgation of a Criminal Law in 1979 and a General Principle of Civil Law in 1987 were considerable formal improvements in the legal order. However, less than three years after the Criminal Law came into effect, some provisions had to be changed in order to accommodate for the smooth operation of political campaigns initiated by the top party leaders in 1983 (Fu 1993:255).

4. The separation of party and government remains to be on the proclaimed reform agenda, yet it seemed to bear little result especially at the top level of administration.

5. Direct election at the county level and more candidates than positions were changes which are expected to have important consequences in the future. As yet their impact has been minimal.



## MAJOR POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES

The reform measures initiated by the leadership of the party-state during the post-Mao era have effected some important changes in the polity and society. These have potentials for leading toward major unintended consequences.

### Changes in Political Culture

The most far-reaching unintended consequence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was to have punctured the myth of the infallibility of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in the eyes of a considerable part of the populace. During the years prior to the early 1980s, though there was no change in the economic relations of production (socialism was kept intact) and the level of productive force experienced no significant changes (no dramatic decline or rise in GNP per capita), there was dramatic change in the political culture of the Chinese people, especially among the urban residents.

The most evident change in political culture was among the young intellectuals.

The most noteworthy aspect of the attitudinal changes in the Chinese intellectual community is the expression of relative moral independence and courage by many of its prominent members. Never before since the establishment of the PRC have the Chinese people expressed their political demands openly and stood up for their principles in the face of official disapproval of the party-state. During the recurring political movements waged in the name of class struggle in the Mao era, once the party-state categorized a person as a heretic, the only option for the latter was open retraction of their views and confession of guilt, though these would not spare the culprits from various forms of punishment. Such public humiliation of dissenters was the rule not the exception. In the post-Mao period the Chinese intellectuals finally took opportunities to show they were not totally devoid of backbones. This change has been dramatic in extreme contrast with the past.

The first batch of victims of the post-Mao clampdown on the Beijing Democracy Wall in the spring of 1979 were young people like Wei Jingsheng, Fu Yuehua, Ren Wandong, and others. For the first time since 1949 the accused culprits departed from their expected dramaturgical roles

and scripts as directed by the party-state.<sup>3</sup> Not only did they not recant their "crimes", but they defiantly defended themselves and their principles and expression. No longer were they prepared to be abject subjects of the party-state. Nor did their friends openly denounce them, as was the norm during the Mao era. Instead, some even secretly taped the victims verbal defense in the court and published the transcripts in mimeographed journals. The dissidents received sentences of long term imprisonment but they remained unrepentant. Many expected "show trials" could not be put on "stage" as originally planned.

The officially sponsored criticism against some literary works in 1980-81 did not produce the desired results. The party-state could not mobilize the masses to engage in massive scale political campaigns to struggle the selected targets. The 1983 anti-spiritual pollution movement against advocates of humanism was aborted in a few months. Many of the targets did not recant such as Wang Ruoshui whose intransigence earned him instant celebrity status among the intellectual community. Now, to be criticized by the establishment became the sure path to fame. Some who made self-criticism regretted that they did not make more efforts to stand up for their beliefs. Some older writers who faithfully and uncritically followed every instruction of the party leaders during the Mao era began to engage in painful introspection. They would no longer denounce themselves or accuse their colleagues at the command of party officials in the Department of Propaganda. Some, like the famous author Ba Jin, openly apologized for having unwittingly contributed to the Cultural Revolution and other political movements. He vowed never to let himself again to be made into a pawn, "we must all confront the truth of our own complicity, they could not have done it if we had not allowed ourselves be taken in" (Ba Jin 1984:76). He also apologized to have followed the party line in criticizing his friends who became targets of political persecution, "I still feel revulsive and ashamed ... . for my former performances. Today, browsing over what I had written thirty years ago, I still cannot pardon myself and do not want the posterity to pardon me" (Ba Jin 1991:746).

At the 4th Congress of the Chinese Writers Association in 1984/5 members elected their own officers who were not listed on the slate offered by the party. In fact, those nominated by the establishment and had been activists in the anti-spiritual pollution campaign were dropped by the secret

3 Political movements in the PRC can be regarded as an official exercise of dramaturgy, see Fu (1989).

ballot. Such show of independence by the PRC intelligentsia was unprecedented since 1949.

In January 1987 CCP expelled Liu Binyan, Fang Lizhi and Wang Ruowang from the ranks of the party. None of the three made any recantation or self-accusation. They became household names. Some unacquainted old workers even came to Liu Binyan's home and volunteered to protect him.<sup>4</sup> These are also indication of the change of political culture among the general populace. Other demoted prominent intellectuals like Su Shaozhi, Li Honglin and others did not make any self-criticism as was expected in the past. Opinion polls show wide spread cynicism and lack of confidence in the party and official orthodoxy among students in the late 1980s (Rosen 1989; *Xinwen Ziyou Daobao*, 20 June 1990).

In early 1989 many prominent Chinese intellectuals wrote letters or signed petitions urging for the release of Wei Jingsheng. These included an open letter by the demoted physicist Fang Lizhi on 6 January, petition by 33 writers on 13 February, similar petitions by 42 scientists on 26 February and 43 social scientists on 14 March. Such show of independence by the Chinese intellectual community was unthinkable in the past. Then came massive student demonstrations which was openly supported by many enlightened cadre-officials and members of the satellite parties. This was followed by the well known June 4 Tiananmen Massacre, and subsequent arrests and suppression. It was the first time since 1949 that hundreds of blacklisted students and dissidents were able to escape from the country with the help from diverse personages in the general population. Many of the arrested student leaders and sympathizers made no confessions of guilt but stood up for their conviction. A most important factor which emboldened the dissenting intellectuals to show open defiance against the party-state was media coverage. Once they knew that there were opportunities for their expression and action to be reported to the public, they felt these were worth risking for.

In the aftermath of the June 4 Tiananmen Massacre, Chinese writers did not lose all their independence. In the forum of literary discussions, opinions critical to leftist orthodoxy were still openly voiced in 1993 (Huaibin 1993).

The major factors leading to the change of political culture are: accumulated popular frustration against Maoist policies, deflation of the

4 Private communication from Liu Binyan to the author.

Maoist myth, latitudes of the party-state to impose ideological orthodoxy, and more direct contacts with the West including ideas and visitors.

### Depletion of Capabilities of the State

The major consequences of reform measures and change of political culture are the depletion of the capabilities of the state to regulate all aspects of social life and deconcentration of centralized state power. The deterioration of totalistic control by the state started the transition of the PRC from totalitarianism towards post-totalitarianism or authoritarianism. Intended actions of the party-state brought forth unintended effects which were unforeseen by the political actors.

First, limited privatization has put a dent on the state's monopoly of employment and total control over the economy. Due to policies allowing limited economic privatization, by 1992 there were 14 million private businesses employing some 23 million employees, and 120,000 private enterprises employing more than 2 million employees (*Renmin Ribao*, 30 October 1992). Though these numbers are minuscule as a percentage of the total work force, it means the state no longer monopolizes labor force employment. The expansion of collective enterprises in the townships and villages means there is no longer one single public employer. There are now at least a part of the population who are not economically totally dependent on the party-state. The control over the economy by the state is no longer total. Economic decentralization also led to relative depletion of Center controlled state revenue as a proportion of the total national income. From 1978 to 1989, state revenue dropped from 37.2% of total national income to 21.2% (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:67). The extractive and allocative capabilities of the state are relatively diminished.

Second, expansion of market mechanism has reduced the effectiveness of the regulative capability of the party-state. The household registration system, which was set up in the early 1950s, had been one of the most effective tools of political control of the party-state over the people. It served the functions of monitoring and mutual surveillance among the populace, control of social mobility, binding the peasants on the farmland, population control, rationing, labor appropriation, control of urban growth, and apprehension of undesirable elements. The effectiveness of household registration was in a large part due to its coordination with the state rationing system which allocated grain, cloth, meat, sugar, eggs, coal, furniture, housing, schooling, marriage certification, travel permit, passport application, welfare, employment, etc. Due to the expansion of



the free market and the rural responsibility system the state no longer monopolizes the distribution of all agricultural products and other commodities. Even the urban resident status can be bought (Ding Shumu et al 1989). This was a party-state tool which had kept 600 million Chinese peasants firmly chained to the soil and an impoverished commune system for more than two decades. With its deterioration there is now a tremendous increase of tens of millions of mobile population in the cities. The mobile population was estimated to amount to more than 60 million in 1992.<sup>5</sup> Thus, economic reform has greatly reduced the effectiveness of this important tool of political control of the party-state.

Third, due to a relaxation of cultural policy there has been a sudden explosion of the media which are no longer administratively amenable to complete centralized control. It is now very difficult, if not impossible, for the political Center of the party-state to exercise total and absolute monopoly over communication. The state's symbolic capability has been relatively reduced. During the heyday of the Mao cult in 1969, a country of 800 million people has access to only 20 journals and 42 newspaper, and in 1967 only 2,231 new book titles were published (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1983:529-31). In 1989 there were 6,078 journals, 852 newspapers<sup>6</sup> and 55,475 new book titles (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:783-4). In 1992 there were 1,442 newspapers, which was only a little less than that in 1947 when the number of registered newspapers numbered 1,781 (*Xinwen Ziyou Daobao*, no. 148, 21 January 1994). The CCP Central Committee's Department of Propaganda is not able to centrally monitor and censor all this amount of media and publication, some of which are now semi-privatized. The reliance on self-censorship is no longer very effective due to changes in political culture. In addition, the proliferation of FAX machines, computers and copiers have attenuated the state's monopoly over communication.

Fourth, there has been a steady surge of official corruption and speculation whose severity surpassed that of the Nationalist days in the mid 1940s. Bribery became rampant. Almost all transactions involving official procedure has to be conducted through some form of personal relations (*guanxi*) of a "backdoor" nature. Official positions can even be bought and sold (*Zhengming*: no. 191, September 1993). The official campaigns waged

5 There are reports that the mobile population in cities amounts to around 90 million in 1993.

6 Not including newspapers at and below the prefectures level.



against corruption seemed to have little effect since the top leadership itself is involved in such transactions through the "princes and princesses." Party discipline is eroding. This has been openly admitted by the gerontocrats.

Fifth, the decentralization of economic management led not only to more autonomy of individual enterprises (state-run or collective) but also to relative economic autonomy both at the provincial level and the city-county level. This means the allocative capability of the Center of the party-state is decreasing relative to the local administration whose autonomy was likened to feudal lords (Shen Liren and Dai Guoyuan 1990). One indicator of decentralization is the increase of the revenue outside the state budget as a percentage of the revenue within the budget jumping from 31% in 1978 to 91.2% in 1988 (PRC State Statistical Bureau 1990:28). This also implied a diminution of the degree of centralization of political power.

#### Emergence of Incipient Proto-civil Society

The change in political culture and depletion of state capability gave rising hope for the growth of modern Chinese civil society which had its incipient appearance during the first half of this century but had been suppressed for more than thirty years since the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (Fu 1993:163-9).

The post-Mao limited privatization provided more economic space for Chinese civil society. There is now a sector in the society that is not totally dependent on the state economically. The depletion of state capacity also provided more opportunities for voluntary interest articulation and aggregation. Even the wide spread official corruption opened up channels for the civil society to influence political decision making.

In the early 1990s, it seems there are indeed indication of an incipient autonomous proto-civil society. During the 1977/78 liberalization, never before since 1949 was there such a surge of unofficial mimeographed publications which numbered more than 150 (Tong 1981). However, the state had been successful in suppressing all private publications in 1980. Some ten years later, as pointed out, due to more local autonomy, erosion of party discipline, and the dramatic increase in the number of journals, books and newspapers, the party-state Center can no longer effectively censor all publications. The change of political culture among the intelligentsia and within the ranks of the party rendered self-censorship less effective, if not obsolete. This led to the publication in 1990 of *Xuebai xuehong* (White Snow and Red Blood) which recounted CCP strategy of intentionally creating famine for the urban residents during the capture of

Zhanchun in the civil war, in 1992 of *Lishi de chaoliu* (The Tide of History) and *Fanzuo beiwanlu* (Anti-left Memoranda), and in 1993 of *Zhongguo "zuo" huo* (China's "Left" Disasters). All the latter three books are relentless critique against the political persecution initiated by the Maoist left orthodoxy. Although the publishers, which are state run enterprises, were reprimanded and books recalled, the fact that such books were published demonstrated the presence of open dissent and opportunities for its articulation.

In the early 1990s there are also signs of rising demand for political participation and voluntary interest aggregation. These were some of the basic causes of the student demonstration in 1986 and 1989. In October 1993 many dissidents signed the "Peace Constitution" calling for the freedom of speech and assembly. In March 1994 Yuan Hongbin, Liu Nianchun and others formally applied for official registration of the organization of the "Alliance for the Protection of the Rights of the Laborers" which had some 120 persons in various places throughout the country to recruit and organize. Although these were suppressed, the mere fact of their appearance is significant pointing to changes in political culture and open dissent.

Though having little power and authority, delegates to the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference began to show more autonomy. Many are not content to remain docile tools of the party. Unanimity was finally broken, and there is no longer a series of 3,000 vs 0 voting records. At these conferences, even after the 1989 crackdown some delegates were willing to offer comments and suggestions beyond those condoned by the party (*Zhengming*, no. 198, April 1994). Due to the change in political culture, these organizations acted in ways unforeseen by their creator, the party-state. As Ogden observed, "the institutions, which were originally designed to look democratic but were not" now function "with an increasing democratic content attaching to their democratic form" (Ogden 1993:238). Of course, that does not mean the party-state has lost its control over these institutions, yet the significant change of the delegates' conduct raises hope for the prospect of limited democratization.

There were indeed important changes since 1978. China is definitely no longer totalitarian but has entered the post-totalitarian or authoritarian stage. The domination of the state over society is no longer total. There are signs of an incipient civil society. Post-Mao Chinese politics has become more pluralist. The discipline of the party is eroding. The political elite is

no longer monolithically unified. There are indications of the assertion of regional autonomy.

However, one must not overestimate the change of state-society relationship. Undoubtedly there has been a diminution of state capacity, but the state is still the sole owner of all the lands including farm land, residence lots, cemeteries, etc. The state still manages all major industrial plants and is able to control all collective enterprises through the party organization. The state continues to monopolize banking, foreign trade, foreign credits, transportation and natural resources. As was pointed out by a Western scholar, the state retains the power "to create categories and ... assign economic actors to them ... while the organization of production has undergone dramatic changes, these have not been accompanied by any significant change in the relations between state and society" (Anagnost 1989:228).

Furthermore, the party-state still has the potential to reverse the trend towards privatization and decentralization in the economic sphere, clampdown in the cultural sphere, and recentralization of power in the political sphere. One should not forget that during the 1950s through political actions of the state all private economy was collectivized; during the 1960s the decentralization of economic management during the Great Leap Forward was successfully recentralized by the command of the political Center. The assertion of irreversibility of the reform measures implemented during the 1980s decade may be too optimistic. Anything granted by the party-state can still be taken away at the whim of individual members of the top leadership. After all, the Chinese Communist Party is still the largest political party in the world with a membership over 51 million and ruling a country of more than 1.1 billion. Though there were endless discussions during the reform years about the separation of the party and the government, the latter still enjoy total control over the state bureaucracy.

One of the distinctive features of Chinese politics carried over from the Mao era is the deinstitutionalization of power and personalization of authority. Deng Xiaoping criticized Mao Zedong for encouraging personality cult and acting with unconstrained power. Ironically, the same observation can be fittingly applied to Deng himself. Backed by the military, Deng was able to oust two nominally formal supreme leaders of the party-state, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Though lacking any formal position since 1989, Deng Xiaoping, the ordinary citizen and a mere member of the party, still is the de facto paramount leader of the party-state. Deng's real authority rests on the personal allegiance paid to him by

the top military commanders. In China, the real basis of political authority is still military force. Mao's famous dictum still holds true, "political power comes from the barrel of a gun." Chinese politics and legal order remain under the rule of man rather than the rule of law.

Although there has been many promises to institute a "socialist legal order," the basic provisions of the Constitution remain mere words printed on paper. The Chinese people still lacks freedom of speech, of press, and of assembly.

### PROSPECTS

With the passing away of Deng Xiaoping and other octogenarian gerontocrats in the near future, it is expected that the PRC will experience major political changes which will have far-reaching socioeconomic consequences. Given the unpredictable nature of Chinese politics, a result of deinstitutionalization and personalization of power and authority, it is difficult to venture into future forecasting. The following are some possible scenarios.

1. If the military remains neutral during the succession struggle and conflicting factions do not resort to coercive measures involving the public security, then some form of stalemate will ensue. During the subsequent process of painful accommodation, the two major factions (so-called reformists and conservatives) may even reach some form of *modus vivendi*. If the peaceful coexistence between the two factions within the party will hold, then a rudimentary political pluralism will be gradually institutionalized. Toleration may replace suppression as the only means for resolving political differences. For further mutual accommodation and assurance of safety, both factions will favor some form of the rule of law. The party's Central Committee and even the party Congress may eventually become effective organization for voicing conflicting opinions and open forum for decision making. Some form of democracy among the party elite will be institutionalized. The toleration of dissent within the party will then give the general populace more latitude for expression and assembly. This is what I term a process of "trickle down democratization." It is hopeful that local elections will continue to become more autonomous from party control. The people's congresses at various levels will then play more important roles in real political participation rather than mere cosmetics. Thus, there may be a combination of both a top-down and a bottom-up processes of some form of gradual democratization. It seems



unlikely that this transition will endanger economic reform in the post-Mao era.

This is a process of "peaceful evolution" and the most desirable scenario. But given the long term tradition of deinstitutionalization and personalization of authority in the PRC, the unrelenting intra-party struggle, and the constant attack on "peaceful evolution" by the party ideologue, this seems to be the least probable, if not impossible, outcome.

2. If the conservative faction could gain the full support of the military and launch a full scale Maoist restoration, then political suppression will be followed by disbanding of all economic reform measures. This will mean an eventual return to the totalitarian stage. But given the fact that most, if not all, members of the PRC political elites have benefitted materially from the post-Mao economic reform and the change of political culture, this is also an unlikely scenario though more probable than the first.

3. If the new leadership, whether Deng's appointed successor or a new group, obtain power by employing public security force with the compliance of the military, then the present status quo will be maintained for quite a prolonged period. There will be more political suppression. Most post-Mao economic reform measures, however, will be retained with the state still dominating the economy. This is the continuation of the authoritarian stage which may last many decades depending on future domestic and international development. Given the long Chinese tradition of autocracy, this seems to be the most likely scenario.

All the three scenarios do not exclude the possibility of some form of social unrest immediately after the generational transfer of power. Of course, some form of splintering into large autonomous regions is also possible. But given the strong trend of nationalism and tradition of political unity in recent Chinese history, even after some form of civil war or turmoil China will be eventually reunited. This will most probably be followed by the above mentioned authoritarian stage.

Whatever the future may be, China had experienced political changes in the post-Mao era with drastic socio-economic consequences. The state-society relationship has changed. China emerged from the totalitarian stage into the authoritarian stage. The party-state still retain enormous capacity to dominate over society.

The case of China demonstrates conclusively that it is the political superstructure that determines the economic base. In China, the political action of the state is the most important factor that molds socio-economic changes.



It is ultimately the Chinese people who hold the future in their own hands. Marxism to the contrary, it is social consciousness that precedes social being.

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