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INTRODUCTION

In September 2011, the people of Wukan—a village in southeastern China—rose up in protest. Their elected leaders, they alleged, had sold land to developers without adequate payment to those who had made their livelihoods farming it. They marched on the government headquarters in nearby Lufeng city, demanding both compensation and the right to new elections.

The leaders of Lufeng did not accede to their demands. Instead they sent riot police to Wukan to shut down the protests and occupy the village. Over the course of several months, the village endured a stand-off with police, and a handful of protesters were arrested and charged with attacking officers. One of the protesters, Xue Jinbo, died in custody. According to Xue's family, the body showed signs of torture, but the official cause of death was cardiac arrest. Tensions between police and the villagers escalated.

Situations like this are all too common in China: leaders ignore the legitimate demands of the people, and punish those who dare to push back against the unpopular and often illegal actions of leaders at all levels of the political system.

And then something extraordinary happened: the provincial leaders stepped in and agreed to the protesters' demands. They offered to investigate the compensation the Wukan farmers had received, and they fired the Wukan leaders who sold the land, arranging for new elections to replace them. One of the leaders of the protest, Lu Zuluang, was elected the new village chief.

The protests and their resolution were hailed as a potentially new model of grassroots democracy in China. Provincial party chief Wang Yang, soon to be elevated to the Politburo in Beijing, said he intended to use his peaceful “Wukan approach” to reform local politics across the province.

But, as is so often the case in Chinese politics, there was more to the story than this. Like the deposed village chief, the newly elected leader was a party member. He had been approved by the provincial party committee, which had intervened to prevent the protests from escalating. The Wukan protests did not spread to other communities, in part because of a blackout on media coverage of the protests, and in part because of fear of arrest. What looked to be a prodemocratic triumph was actually the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reimposing its authority.

Lu, the new village chief, was himself charged with corruption several years later. Was this delayed retaliation for leading the original protest? Or a reminder that even protest leaders may fall prey to the same bad behaviors as those they once protested against? It’s hard to say, because the domestic media blackout continued, and the people of Wukan were warned against speaking to foreign media. What originally seemed like the start of something big turned out to be just one more small-scale event that—while it did break out into global news—went unnoticed by most people in China. In the end, the “Wukan approach” did not spread.

This episode illustrates well many of the themes familiar to students of Chinese politics. The imperative from the CCP to create economic growth—by, for instance, converting farmland for industrial and commercial purposes—creates tensions between state and society, as local leaders take actions that align with the party but infuriate local citizens. With stability as another policy imperative, higher level officials are often tacit allies of local citizens when tensions boil over, willing to remove local leaders to defuse conflict. In these instances, the CCP is responsive to public opinion—but will not tolerate demands that would challenge its monopoly on power.

To understand China in the twenty-first century, we must begin with one basic fact: all political activity centers on the CCP. How the party has approached economic, political, and social reforms over the past

few decades—and the reversal of many of these reforms under the current leadership—shaped not only the political system but also the party’s relationship with the people.

* * *

In the decades after Mao’s rule ended, major reforms transformed economic and social life in China. The private sector greatly expanded and the country opened up to connect to the global economy; as it did, incomes rose, mobility increased, and Chinese people began to move from the countryside to the cities. All of this change created expectations among foreign observers that China’s political system would have to change as well.

These expectations of political change were influenced by modernization theory, which is based on one of the most well-established relationships in the social sciences: the more prosperous a country is, the more likely it is to be a democracy. According to this theory, an increasingly modernized economy is ultimately incompatible with an authoritarian regime, as economic modernization triggers social changes—urbanization, higher levels of education, the decline of agriculture in favor of industry and commerce, the emergence of a middle class—that change political values, and these new values in turn produce demands for a more open political system. This is what happened in the Western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in East Asia and Latin America in the late twentieth century.

However, China’s leaders had a different expectation. Going back to Deng Xiaoping and continuing under Xi Jinping, the CCP expected that economic modernization, if handled properly, would produce popular support and solidify its hold on power. Greater prosperity was intended to enhance the CCP’s legitimacy, not threaten its survival. They wanted to preserve the essential elements of the one-party regime they established in 1949, with the CCP firmly in command of the policy goals, of who would be allowed to participate in the political system, and of the ideas and interests that would be allowed or—alternatively—suppressed. Unlike democratic regimes, the legitimacy of the regime

would be based not on the consent of the governed but on its ability to modernize the country.

To a large degree China's leaders have achieved their goals. There are certainly democracy advocates in China, but they find little support among their fellow citizens, who place a higher value on economic growth, social stability, and national unity—the same priorities as the party's—than on the political rights and freedoms that democracy promises. China's leaders have been determined to avoid political liberalization that would weaken party rule, even if it yielded better economic results. They were willing to settle for poorer economic results, if necessary, to maintain the party's supremacy, and have resisted and repressed all efforts to promote political reform leading to democratization.

But with the international financial crisis in 2008, after fifteen years of double-digit growth, China entered a new phase. Slower economic growth—6.1 percent in 2019—has become the new normal. (The economy even shrank by 6.8 percent in the first quarter of 2020, but that was an aberration due to the COVID-19 epidemic.) Under President Xi Jinping, China is turning away from the “reform and opening” policies championed by his predecessor Deng Xiaoping and toward a still ill-defined “socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.”

China's contemporary political system is best described as “responsiveness without accountability.” Just as it was in Wukan, the party is often responsive to public opinion on strictly material issues. When new initiatives spark public opposition, the party has agreed to cancel the building of hydroelectric dams, petrochemical plants, and high-speed rail lines. After public outrage about the worsening air quality in major cities, it adopted stricter air pollution standards. Faced with a surge of protests and petitions about inadequate compensation for land seized for redevelopment, it adopted new policies on paying compensation to farmers and homeowners.

But the CCP is not responsive on political issues. And in China, almost anything can have political overtones: academic freedom; internet use; and the rights of women, migrant workers, the handicapped, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups all easily become politicized if the party deems them so.

And, while the party and government are responsive in some specific situations, they refuse to be accountable to the public at large. Officials are not elected by the people but appointed by those at higher levels of the party and government. With the exception of village leaders and local people's congresses (the CCP's name for legislatures), officials do not have to worry about garnering votes. Their public appearances are limited and usually scripted. While there are opportunities for individuals and groups to comment on pending laws and regulations, the government does not make these comments public (as occurs in the United States); it is impossible to know whether the comments led to changes in the final versions. A free media and a vigorous civil society can be important watchdogs on the government's performance, but the media is controlled by the state in China, investigative journalists are censored and occasionally imprisoned, and civil society groups that criticize the party's policies and its leaders are routinely suppressed. Protests against local officials often lead to concessions, but in order to prevent these cases from emboldening other potential protesters, some protest leaders are typically charged with endangering social order and are imprisoned—as happened in Wukan. Protests can be an effective means of challenging officials who do not implement policies properly, but harsh punishment serves as a warning to others not to try the same thing.

In short, the party may be responsive to the public, but selectively and on its own terms. It is not accountable to the people, which would require its officials or its laws to be endorsed by the public. There is no formal equivalent of initiative, referendum, and recall as in democracies around the world. The party does not even allow public opinion surveys to include approval ratings for its leaders, instead asking only if people support or trust party and government officials in general. To challenge officials they deem to be corrupt, malfeasant, or incompetent, Chinese citizens instead use online and public protests. These officials can be removed from office, but only by their superiors—making them accountable to their superiors, not directly to the people.

This responsive aspect of the Chinese political system is well known to specialists, but less familiar to others. Much of the research on contemporary Chinese politics is published in scholarly outlets that are not

easily accessible to more general readers, and—like the study of political science more generally—it is increasingly quantitative and largely impenetrable to readers without advanced training in statistics. Therefore, few readers outside the academy understand what has now become the conventional wisdom on Chinese politics.

Much of the media—including excellent reporting by journalists—focuses on the repressive aspects of the political system, which are quite real, without similar coverage of the other tools used by China's leaders to govern the country, the informal understandings of both the party and the people that influence political activities, and the everyday practice of politics in twenty-first-century China.

* * *

The following chapters have three broad themes. First, they focus on issues of greatest salience to many political systems: how leaders are chosen, how policies are decided upon and implemented, and how the state interacts with society (whether in cooperation or in conflict). Second, they track the dramatic change in these practices over time as the party's prevailing priorities have evolved—with a particular focus on what has changed (and what has not) under Xi Jinping. In particular, Xi's approach is more repressive than responsive. Third, they identify where consensus exists among scholars, where debates continue, and where gaps in our knowledge remain. China's political system is more opaque than most. We need to recognize where reliable evidence does and does not exist. In the absence of good information, we should not substitute our own logic or fears for the vision of China's leaders.

Whether framed in terms of democracy, regime resilience, or regime vulnerabilities, most foreign observers are interested in what keeps the party in power. That is the question animating much of empirical research on China. It is therefore fitting to begin with this topic in chapter 1, where I compare the political and economic priorities of China's five generations of leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, and the resulting changes in the party's relationship with the people. This chapter also introduces the three main political institutions in China—the

party, the government, and the legislature—and how the party controls the other two.

The regular replacement of leaders at all levels is a distinctive feature of China's authoritarian political system. Most authoritarian regimes replace their leaders in one of two ways: the death of the incumbent or his overthrow in a coup. Both methods of leadership change create a crisis for the regime. China has been an outlier in this regard. Over the past few decades it has devised a routine process for selecting, promoting, and replacing leaders. Chapter 2 will describe the process, mapping how local leaders compete with one another to demonstrate their capability: those that produce economic growth and greater tax revenue are more likely to be promoted and moved into higher levels of government—from villages to townships to counties to prefectures to provinces and ultimately to the central level in Beijing. After several rounds of this competition, all survivors have shown their competence. As a result, promotion to provincial and central posts relies instead on political connections and factional alliances. The importance of both competence and connections for those who make it to the top is apparent in the career paths of China's most recent top leaders: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping.

Once leaders are in place, how do they advance their policy agendas? That is the topic of chapter 3. Studies of China's policy process reveal different patterns of decision making in different policy areas. Politically sensitive issues that pose an existential threat to the CCP—for example, internet censorship and developments in restive provinces like Tibet and Xinjiang—are made strictly within the top leadership. Areas of strategic importance, such as whether to stimulate the economy in order to produce short-term growth or to introduce structural reforms to achieve long-term goals, allow for extensive politicking within the state, both between different bureaucracies and between central and local officials. Policy options that are more technical in nature, such as the environment and health care, are more open to nonstate stakeholders and the public more generally. In short, the party is willing to be responsive in some policy areas but not others.

The role of civil society in both making and implementing policy is the topic of chapter 4. For much of the post-Mao period, China

specialists have debated the existence of civil society in China and its potential to affect social and political change. This debate is based on the premise that a strong civil society is both a threat to authoritarian regimes and the basis for stable democracy. This chapter will distinguish between different realms of civil society: one that is engaged in politically oriented issues and strives to bring about democratization (what some refer to as the “real” civil society and which is in short supply in China), and another that is composed of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focused on social issues, such as adult literacy, job training, and poverty alleviation (these are much more numerous). The former group is critical of the state, and the state responds with often harsh repression; the latter group seeks to partner with the state in order to avoid being shut down and to obtain the resources it needs. This chapter will explore the remarkable variation in how the party treats different types of civil society groups, in different parts of the country, and at different points in time.

Chapter 5 will examine the sources of public protests and assess how much of a threat they pose to political stability in general and regime survival in particular. Are protests a sign of underlying resentments that could overwhelm the regime? Do they pose a danger or simply allow the public to vent and are harmless? Could they be beneficial to political leaders as a source of information about trends in public opinion and pockets of dissatisfaction? The politics of protest have been the subject of many academic studies; some focus on the motivations and strategies of protesters, others on the state’s response. How the CCP handles protests reflects one of the dualities of Chinese politics noted above: it is often willing to meet the material demands of protesters (e.g., low or unpaid wages, inadequate compensation for seized property) while also punishing protest leaders and repressing any demands for political change. This chapter will synthesize what we know about protest in China as well as the limits of that knowledge.

The resurgence of religion is the focus of chapter 6. Much media attention has focused on the spread of Christianity and the state’s efforts to control it, but the revival of traditional religions, especially Buddhism, has been just as rapid. In some cases, religious institutions in China have provided useful goods and services to local communities;

in other cases, they have been the source of violent conflict between state and society. In contrast to the popular perception that the Chinese state is determined to suppress religion, this chapter will emphasize the more varied expressions of religion, religious policy, and religious belief in China. This chapter also illustrates a recurring theme of the book: the more repressive atmosphere under Xi Jinping and the resulting pressure on unsanctioned but previously tolerated religious groups.

Nationalism has been a prominent feature in both China's domestic and foreign policies. The causes and consequences of Chinese nationalism are explored in chapter 7. On one hand, nationalist protests are one of the few types of dissent tolerated by the state in China. As a result, nationalist protests often become a proxy for other types of complaints. Chinese society is not necessarily more nationalistic than in the past, but nationalism is more permissible as a frame for protesters. On the other hand, the state uses patriotic education campaigns and official media to promote nationalism, and in turn popular support for the regime. However, promoting nationalism is risky business: it can help create public support for the state, but it can also turn against the state if the public believes the state is too slow or too weak in response to the actions and statements of other countries. The causes and consequences of Chinese nationalism are not simply an academic concern but are also of great interest to foreign observers. Will an increasingly nationalistic China take more aggressive actions toward its neighbors? Will it be a threat to foreign interests? This chapter will explore these questions by using public opinion survey data and case studies of nationalist protests, and by assessing the potential implications for China's foreign policy behavior.

This chapter will also look at the party's treatment of groups that do not share its vision of national identity. In Tibet and Xinjiang, religion and ethnic identity overlap in ways the party finds threatening, and the party has responded with both harsh repression and intensive patriotic education programs. In Hong Kong, a rising sense of Hong Kong identity, distinct from Chinese national identity, prompted prolonged protests in 2014 and 2019. These cases show how the party's notion of Chinese identity produces often violent conflict when it is not shared by local identities.

The book ends with a chapter assessing the prospects for democratization in China. In my experience as a teacher and public speaker,

this is the question that interests American audiences the most—and yet it is really secondary to a more fundamental question about the potential for regime change. Without regime change, there can be no democratization—but even if the party does fall from power, democracy is not guaranteed. In recent decades, most cases of regime change did not result in democracy but in new forms of authoritarian rule. This has led many scholars to turn their attention to sources of regime stability, looking at the regime's frailties without exploring the prospects for democracy *per se*.

Still, throughout the post-Mao era of reform in China, the potential for China's democratization has driven debate among those in academia and beyond. Is democracy the inevitable consequence of economic modernization? Will economic reforms be stymied if not accompanied by political reform? Is Chinese society developing a preference for democracy, or does public opinion favor the continuation of authoritarian rule? Can an authoritarian government be responsive if it is not also accountable? This chapter will assess the ongoing debate and use the recent experiences of other countries to offer a comparative perspective on the likelihood of democratization, how it may happen, and what consequences may result.

The intent of this book is to share the rich research findings that have shaped the current academic understanding of Chinese politics. At a time when the political discourse about China has tilted toward demonization, this is more important than ever. For readers whose views of China are shaped by memories of the Cultural Revolution or the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, by critiques from political leaders in the decades following, and by media coverage, this perspective may seem jarring. There is no question that the CCP uses repression against its perceived enemies, but it also uses other tools to create popular support: rising prosperity, nationalist pride, and even responsiveness to public opinion in varying degrees. It is my hope that readers will come away with a fuller understanding of China's political system, how it has arrived at this point, and where it may be heading.

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