

# Political Legitimacy in Post-Tiananmen China

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CLEMENT CHEN, DEC 19 2014

In the pre-dawn hours of June 4 1989, elements of the People's Liberation Army entered downtown Beijing and crushed the student-led protests in Tiananmen Square. The ensuing massacre exposed a fundamental rift between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the population it ruled. The brutality of the crackdown, the schism within the upper echelons of the party, and the open insubordination of elements of the military led some experts to conclude that China and the Party would go the way of its Eastern European counterparts and fragment (Stavis, 1990). However, China did not fragment, but emerged as the second largest economy in the world and has been predicted to become the largest economy in the world by as early as 2016 (International Monetary Fund, 2011). Furthermore, rather than losing its grip on power, the Party managed to steer China back on to the path of economic development. In fact, a 2013 study of a random sample of 3763 Chinese nationals revealed that the average support for the regime was at 80% (Lewis-Beck, et al.). The Party's uncanny ability to regain and hold onto the public's support after the 1989 massacre provokes two questions:

- *How has the Party managed to regain public support in the post-Tiananmen era?*
- *To what extent did the Tiananmen protests impact the interactions between the Party and the public?*

The current relationship between China's Party-state and the public will be examined against the context of pre-Tiananmen China; primarily 1980s post-Maoist China.

### Changes in the Interactions Between the Party and the Public

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked an end to decades of Maoist mismanagement, and was followed by the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping to the position of paramount leader. In 1978, China, under the stewardship of Deng, embarked upon the policy of *gaige kaifang* (Reform and Opening Up) and unlocked the vast economic potential of China. In spite of the brief return of Maoist hardliners and the international sanctions that followed the 1989 massacres, China's economic reforms have proven to be irreversible and have caused fundamental changes in Chinese society and politics. This new China is not the totalitarian regime of Mao nor the authoritarian threat imagined by alarmists in the West (Jones, 2012). China is undoubtedly ruled by an undemocratic authoritarian regime, but the reforms did not occur in a political vacuum (Li, 2008). Consequently, China has experienced drastic changes in the manner in which the Party and the public interact, thereby provoking the questions:

- *How has the Communist Party adapted to the post-reform era?*
- *How has the Communist Party been able to shape the public in the post-reform era?*

Although many of the changes to the Party-public dynamic were due to the Party adapting to the new circumstances of the modern era, the Party has also actively shaped the Chinese public, thereby allowing for some measure of control over the circumstances it faced. Furthermore, the Party under Mao won the Chinese Civil War, and as such its legitimacy was founded upon its revolutionary and socialist credentials. However since the economic reforms, the Party could no longer rely upon revolutionary zeal to legitimise its rule. Consequently, the Party has sought new methods to legitimise its power.

China under Mao was a totalitarian regime, wherein the Party-state neither tolerated the slightest hint of dissent nor

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did it allow outside forces the smallest amount of power and influence (Lo, 1999). However, the economic reforms coincided with an end to the unrestricted power of the regime, a retreat from totalitarianism, and the re-emergence of Chinese civil society (Hsu, 2010). Due to the Party's history of totalitarianism, many have concluded that China lacks a civil society (Frolic, 1997, p. 56). This view that Chinese civil society has been locked in a state of stasis is predicated upon the view that civil society must be in conflict with the state. However, civil society and the state do not necessarily need to be in conflict, and could in fact cooperate (Yu & Wang, 2011). This cooperation is best exemplified by the Wenzhou Business Association. Yu and Zhou performed an empirical study into the formation and evolution of the Wenzhou Business Association (2013). The authors argue that in spite of limits imposed by the government, there exists a nascent and increasingly vocal civil society. Since the 1990s Wenzhou has seen the emergence of business associations that protect business rights, and help monitor and self-regulate the market. Furthermore, in the 1990s the Wenzhou Business Association contributed to regulations on footwear manufacturing, thereby demonstrating the ability of civil society to cooperate with and fulfil the former roles of the state. The Party may not tolerate a civil society that is in opposition to its rule. However, as a consequence of the economic reforms, the Party has adapted and permitted the emergence of a nascent civil society to fulfil the roles that it can no longer satisfy.

In addition to the emergence of a civil society, the Party has become more receptive to public consultation and oversight. Prior to the reform era, the Party could pursue any policy it wanted without the need to consult the public. However, with the emergence of China's civil society, the public has become more vocal in its demands for transparency. Consequently, the state adopted a number of measures to increase government transparency. In 2007, the regime announced a series of rules requiring all government departments to publish online information on a wide range of issues, including government spending and land acquisitions (Xinhua, 2007). The regime's willingness to work towards greater transparency points towards a new relationship between the Party and the public, wherein the Party understands that it must deal with the public in an open and transparent manner.

Furthermore, the Party has adopted a far more consultative mechanism in its decision-making process. In 1999, the city of Wenlin, Zhejiang, adopted a process of "democratic consultation", whereby local leaders sought public feedback on many policy decisions (Lang, 2011). Although this mechanism is restricted to the local and provincial levels, the emergence of a more democratic framework for governance suggests that the Party is pursuing a new source of legitimacy. The Party no longer wants to be the revolutionary party of the past, but a ruling party whose legitimacy is founded upon benign interactions between the Party and the public.

The 1989 massacre proved that China is a single-party state with very little room for outright opposition to the Party. However, since the reform era the Party has begun to exhibit the attributes of a soft-authoritarian regime, such as Singapore. The Party permits the direct election of village-level governments and local people's congresses, who in turn elect higher levels of government, thereby allowing for an indirect democratic process (Weatherley, 2006). Although these local level elections have been dominated by the Party, there has been an improvement in the quality and transparency of these elections (O'Brien & Han, 2009). Moreover, the elections have seen a growing number of non-Party candidates contesting and winning elections. Hence, the gradual progress in grassroots democratic rights is emblematic of the drastic changes in the interaction between the Party and the public.

Furthermore, the expansion in grassroots rights has resulted in a fundamental change in how the Party deals with public protests. In 2011, residents of Wukan village in Guangdong confronted the corrupt local government and eventually expelled local Party officials. During the whole protest the villages did not challenge the legitimacy of the Party. In fact, the villagers pleaded for the central government to intervene and remove corrupt officials. Eventually, provincial officials intervened and the village was allowed to host a free and open election in 2012; the first village-election that was completely free of the party's influence (South China Morning Post, 2012). The 2012 Wukan village election is demonstrative of the growing acceptance of pluralism amongst certain elements within the Party.

In addition to the Wukan protests, the Party has shown further willingness to consult and even acquiesce to the demands of protesters. In 2010 and 2011, the Guangdong government enacted a number of proposals and laws that restricted use of Cantonese in media. These actions were met with street protests that directly challenged Party policy. However, rather than resorting to violent or coercive means, the provincial government backed down and

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demonstrated a willingness to listen to the demands of the public (South China Morning Post, 2014). Furthermore, the ongoing Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong has been allowed to continue without outright interference by the Party (Forsythe, 2014). These incidents are due to the comparatively liberal politics of Guangdong (The Economist, 2011), and the 'One-Country-Two-Systems' relationship between Hong Kong and China. Nevertheless, the fact remains that elements of the Party are willing to tolerate opposition that does not directly challenge its legitimacy indicates that China has abandoned the totalitarianism of Maoist China to become an increasingly pluralistic society. Moreover, in his final speech as premier of China, Wen Jiabao warned that China must pursue democracy and greater political reforms (Richburg, 2012).

Although the Party under Deng successfully transitioned from a revolutionary party to a reformist party, it needed to transform itself into an institutionalised governing party (Zheng, 2003). The new Chinese middle class is far too wealthy to be satisfied with a governing party whose legitimacy is predicated on economic development. Consequently, the Party has pursued a number of structural reforms. The Party has moved on from the strongman politics of Mao and Deng towards institutionalised collective leadership (Bo, 2010, p. 20). Zheng argued that the renewed focus on collective leadership is symptomatic of the fact that the Party's leadership currently lacks a charismatic individual (2003). However, the fact remains that the Party's mechanisms for power transition have become institutionalised and the power of individual leaders now lies in their positions, as opposed to personal charisma. Hence, the increasing institutionalisation is demonstrative of the Party's ability to adapt to the increasing wealth of its citizenry.

China has a legalistic history of the 'rule by law', wherein the law served the state and its rulers. However, with the market reforms, China has made significant steps towards the 'rule of law' (Yu, 2008), whereby China would be governed by the law as opposed to the arbitrary decisions of the Party. In 2007, the National People's Congress adopted private property rights in which an individual's property would have the same legal protection as state property (The Economist, 2007). Additionally, in 2013, China announced the abolition of the 're-education through labour' system (Amnesty International, 2013). China's legal reforms have been matched by vigorous anti-corruption drives that have even extended overseas to countries like New Zealand (Anderlini, 2014). Although China's legal reforms and anti-corruption drives may not be the sign of democratisation, these measures do point towards a regime that understands that its legitimacy must be founded upon institutionalised rule; a notion that would have been foreign in the past.

The Party has pursued a large number of reforms, and changed the way it governs and interacts with the public in order to legitimise its rule. However, these changes have not been the only contributor to the Party's continued resilience and legitimacy. During the reforms of the 1980s, Maoism and communism were proven to be ideologically bankrupt (Nathan, 2008) and the Party faced an ideological crisis. This crisis and the success of economic reform turned many students and intellectuals towards the West and democratic reform, ultimately resulting in the Tiananmen protests (Wang, 2008). Consequently, the Party needed a new ideological basis for its legitimacy; nationalism. The Party understood that "nationalism proved to be stronger than socialism when it came to bonding working classes together, and stronger than capitalism that bound bankers together" (Nye, 1993, p. 61). Hence, the Party has pursued a policy of 'state-led nationalism' (Zhao, 1998), whereby the Party positioned itself as the guardian of the Chinese nation, civilisation and history. This repositioning of the Party from the revolutionary vanguard to the embodiment of Chinese nationalism is best exemplified by the comments made by Chen Xiankui, professor of Renmin University: "the love of the China and the love of the Party are one and the same" (2014). The policy of co-opting nationalism has proven to be an effective method of legitimising its rule, and marks an abandonment of its socialist and Marxist roots.

The Party's rebranding as a nationalist ruling party as opposed to a revolutionary communist party has been ingrained into the national psyche through China's Patriotic Education Campaign. The campaign was launched in 1994 in order to educate Chinese youth on China's 'century of humiliation' and the Party's role in defending the Chinese nation (Wang, 2008). Consequently, the campaign adopted a narrative of victimisation and glorified the achievements of the Party. Furthermore, the Party no longer saw history through the Maoist framework of peasant rebellions and class struggles, thereby allowing for the political rehabilitation of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the retelling of China's experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as 'China versus the West' rather than 'the CPC versus the KMT'.

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(Wang, 2008). The Patriotic Education Campaign demonstrates how the Party has not only adapted to public demands, but it has also moulded the public, thereby allowing the Party to shape and control public opinion.

Furthermore, the Party has adapted Confucianism to legitimise its rule (Zhang, 1998). Since the May Fourth Movement, Confucius was regularly attacked by the proto-communist and the subsequent CPC. However, with the rise of nationalism, the Party has tolerated and, in some cases, promoted Confucianism as another source of legitimacy (Billioud & Thoraval, 2007). In 2001, the CPC Central Committee adopted the 'Implementation Outline on Ethic Building for Citizens,' wherein 10 Confucian virtues were promoted as the national code of ethical conduct (Law, 2006). The renewed focus on Confucian virtues and ethics is reflected in the re-emergence of Confucian academies (Billioud & Thoraval, 2007) and calls for the establishment of a national state-sponsored Confucian church (Ownby, 2009). Although these actions are the result of proponents outside of the government, the Chinese government has established over 300 Confucius Institutes around the world, sponsored a 2004 movie glorifying the life of Confucius, and, for a brief period, permitted the installation of a bronze statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square opposite the portrait of Mao (Jacobs, 2011). Moreover, the government has adopted laws to enforce filial piety, a fundamental concept in Confucian thought (DeHart, 2013). The Party's tolerance and partial support for the Confucian revival reflects a fundamental change in how the Party and the public interacts. The Party has lost all confidence in Maoism and Marxism legitimising its rule, and has chosen to rely upon nationalism and Confucianism to shape the national psyche and to legitimise its rule.

The *gaige kaifang* policy brought irreversible socioeconomic changes to China. Consequently, the Party has adapted the way it interacts with the public by withdrawing from people's lives and allowing for the emergence of civil society. The economic rights brought along by reform and the emergence of an increasingly vocal civil society have resulted in greater accountability and transparency, along with a recognition of grassroots rights. Additionally, the Party has acquiesced to the public's demands for greater democracy and consultation, and has at times reversed its decisions when faced with public protest. Furthermore, the Party has sought to institutionalise its power through legal and structural reforms, thereby codifying the processes in which the Party and public can interact. All of these reforms and changes were pursued with the greater goal of securing legitimacy. However, the Party recognised the need for an ideological basis of its legitimacy. The breakneck speed at which China developed under the policy of reform proved that socialism and communism were bankrupt, thereby leading the Party to adopt nationalism and Confucianism as the key legitimisers of its rule.

## The Impact of Tiananmen

The supporters of the Tiananmen protests included students, teachers, soldiers, urban workers and party members. The broad public support for the movement forced the Party to accept that it could no longer rely upon its revolutionary legacy to serve as the foundation of its legitimacy. Consequently, the Party pursued large number of reforms, and changed the way it interacted with the public. Hence, it could be concluded that the Tiananmen protests and the subsequent crackdown left a profound impact on Party-public relations. However, such an attempt to assign societal change on a single event neglects the reforms enacted before Tiananmen. Therefore, the following question must be asked:

- *To what extent did the Tiananmen protests impact the interactions between the Party and the public?*

The Party's immediate response in the aftermath of the massacres was a return to Maoism and coercion in order to secure its rule (Gilley, 2008). After Tiananmen, Deng was forced to resign, allowing the conservative hardliners Li Peng and Chen Yun to take control and steer China away from reform (Vogel, 2013, p. 665). However, the brief leftist ascendancy was reversed in the wake of Deng's 1992 Southern Tour; a series of public speeches promoting economic reform. Initially the central government responded cautiously to Deng's calls. However the combined public support and Deng's own prestige made the calls for reform irresistible, thereby motivating the Party to return to the path of economic reform (Misra, 2003). The Party's return to economic reform negated the immediate socioeconomic impact of Tiananmen, thereby limiting the overall impact of the protests.

The 'Patriotic Education Campaign' was launched in the wake of Tiananmen as an appeal to nationalism. Zhao noted

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that the chronology of events suggests that the Party's renewed focus on nationalistic education was a response to the impact of Tiananmen (1998). However, as stated above, the Party adopted nationalism because of the failure of socialism. Hence, the Patriotic Education Campaign and the Party's emphasis on nationalism was a consequence of the Party's ideological evolution. The Party's legitimacy crisis did not begin with Tiananmen. Rather, the reforms of the 1980s triggered a "crisis of faith in socialism" (Chen, 1995) and a legitimacy crisis, thereby contributing to the 1989 protests. Hence, the Patriotic Education Campaign was not a direct response to the public support for the Tiananmen protests, but an attempt to address an underlying legitimacy crisis triggered by the *gaige kaifang* policies.

Furthermore, the fundamental changes in the interactions between the Party and public were not the consequence of the Tiananmen protests, but due to the deep societal changes triggered by the economic reforms. Mitter argued that the Tiananmen uprising was a brief set back in the unstoppable socioeconomic changes unleashed by the reforms of the 1980s (2004, p. 245). The growing wealth and increasing education of the Chinese people meant that the Party had no choice but to retreat from the people's private lives. Although the Party is sensitive to any mention of the massacre (Wan & Denyer, 2014) and will not tolerate any direct challenge to its power, the impact of the protests upon the Party's interactions with the public is very limited. The Party's stance is a result of its authoritarian nature, and as such the Party would react harshly to any challenge, regardless of Tiananmen. Hence, the social and political reforms, and the Party's intolerance of direct opposition are not the consequence of the Tiananmen movement. In actuality, the social and political reforms were a by-product of the economic reforms of the 1980s, and the Party's inability to deal with dissent is the natural reaction of an authoritarian regime.

Moreover, the Party has pursued policies that further legitimise its rule and provide it with an unusual longevity. The Party's pursuit of legitimacy was not only the result of the legitimacy crisis of the 1980s, but also an attempt to achieve a degree of "authoritarian resilience" (Nathan, 2003). The Party recognised the failure of socialism and adapted to the circumstances of the post-Tiananmen political environment. The Party pursued institutionalisation and limited democratisation with the aim of securing its authoritarian rule. The Party's new model of governance was not simply an attempt to address the sources of the Tiananmen protests, nor was it a response to the protests themselves. The Party's actions were an attempt to build a resilient authoritarian system.

The post-Tiananmen period was marked by a great number of political and social reforms that dramatically changed the way in which the Party and public interacted. However, despite the sequence of events, the new Party-public dynamics were not a direct result of the Tiananmen protests. The Party's pursuit of nationalism and the promotion of 'patriotic education' were not a response to the Tiananmen crisis, but a response to the legitimacy crisis triggered by the reforms of the 1980s. Additionally, the social and political reforms of the post-Tiananmen era were the consequence of the Chinese people's new wealth and power brought on by the reforms. Furthermore, the Chinese government's intolerance of direct opposition is symptomatic of its authoritarian nature, not an underlying fear of a repeat of Tiananmen. Moreover, the Party's attempts to reclaim its political legitimacy were not the result of the protests, but a long-sighted strategy to build a resilient authoritarian regime.

## Conclusion

The 1989 Tiananmen protests was, like many of the preceding protests in Tiananmen, a call for change made by ordinary citizens. However, the Party responded to these calls with a brutal crackdown. The post-Tiananmen era was marked by a brief return to Maoism, followed by massive economic, social and political reforms that fundamentally changed the way in which the Party interacted with the public. The changes since Tiananmen have expanded civil society and resulted in a greater tolerance of consultation between the Party and the public. However, Tiananmen did not trigger the changes that led to the new modern China. In actuality, the long list of reforms pursued under the policy of *gaige kaifang* in the 1980s proved to be the true instigator of change. The success of capitalism and the failure of socialism triggered a legitimacy crisis within China, thereby resulting in the Tiananmen protests and the Patriotic Education Campaign of the post-Tiananmen era. The argument that the Tiananmen protests impacted and influenced the post-Tiananmen reforms is emblematic of a human need to assign agency to singular events. Humans like to tell simple narratives with identifiable triggers and events, thereby neglecting the innumerable socioeconomic changes that lead to such events. Despite the brutality and tragic loss of lives, the Tiananmen massacre was a detour in China's long road to reform.

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