RESEARCH ARTICLE
The adaptive state – understanding political reform in China
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(Received 12 July 2012; final version received 12 November 2012)

At the Conference of the National People’s Party (NPP) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao re-emphasised the urgency of political reform to ensure the legitimacy of the party and to provide a strong institutional underpinning to the construction of a harmonious society based on balanced social and economic development. However, no consensus has emerged either in Sino studies or in political journalism as to the trajectory of these reforms. Nor do senior civil servants have a clear understanding of the logic behind China’s new wave of political reforms. Most Sino scholars have focused on the question of whether these reforms represent a move towards democratisation or are just another incremental step in the transition process. This investigation mirrors the core differentiation between China’s Constitution and Party (CCP) ideology and Western’s democratic values. This article provides an understanding or ‘Road Map’ of China’s political reforms. It argues that the latest wave of reforms has an adaptive quality which will not threaten the CCP’s dominant position rather they will strengthen the state’s capacity to govern through the selective devolution of power both to civil society and local representative institutions.

Keywords: China; democratisation; devolution; transition; political reform

Introduction

In August 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao delivered a prominent speech warning that China’s economy and national modernisation process would be jeopardised if the country failed to undertake systemic political reform (Gilboy and Heginbotham 2010). Political analysts argued that the fifth conference of 17th Party Congress in 2010 represented a new stage in China’s political reform which will last 30 years (Zheng 2010).\textsuperscript{1}

Since the Open Reform policy in 1978, China’s economic development has been universally judged as a remarkable contribution to the world economy. Indeed, despite the recent global financial crisis, China’s economic growth remained at 9% annually, though it has been adversely affected by a series of natural disasters, such as the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 (BBC 2009b).\textsuperscript{2} However, the Chinese development project has not been without problems. It has had to confront the difficulties of balancing economic and social development with political reform. Sino scholars have used this problematic to evaluate whether the arising reforms represent a move towards democratisation or are just another incremental step in the

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transition process. This investigation mirrors the core differentiation between China’s Constitution and Party (CCP) ideology and Western’s democratic values.

Scholars in Chinese political studies hold different perspectives on the degree to which the CCP should advance political reform in the fields of free media and institutional democratisation (e.g. increasing the power of the legislature, judicial institutions and community governance). Radicals argue that China’s political reform strategy should involve the Western liberal notion of the separation of powers (legislature, executive and judicial powers) and establishing political opposition parties as the best means to achieve democracy. Others argue that the privatisation of land is the key prerequisite for political reform (Xu 2012). However, these reforms are presently unachievable as they are not allowed under China’s constitution and threaten the ruling position of the CCP rules (2007).

In contrast, mainstream scholars argue that the CCP is an adaptive party that has maintained its legitimacy through a series of political reforms, such as the extension of party membership under the previous President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Zeming Jiang (16th Party Congress Report, 2002), implementing direct elections in the rural areas and strengthening intra-party democracy.

This article provides an understanding or ‘Road Map’ of China’s political reforms. It argues that the latest wave of reforms has an adaptive quality which will not threaten the CCP’s dominant position rather they will strengthen the state’s capacity to govern through the selective devolution of power both to civil society and local representative institutions.

The article draws on Chinese and Western scholarship on the reform era combined with data derived from a large number of semi-structured and informal interviews which were conducted with key protagonists in the reform process in Beijing during field visits to government departments between 2004 and 2010.

An adaptive party (‘Yushi JuJin’)

Despite the China’s stunning economic development, the CCP has been widely criticised for the paucity of its social and political development. Li (2008, 1), for example, argues that the ‘CCP favours a one-party monopoly of power without an independent judicial system or free media’. In addition, Pei (2008, 4) also argues that ‘juxtaposed against massive and positive economic and social changes, the pace of political change has significantly lagged behind that of economic progress’.

However, it is important to note that the principle rationale behind the CCP’s political reform experiments is to ensure the dominance of the party in a period of rapid social and economic change while adapting itself to the new domestic and international circumstances. The Presidency of Hu Jintao emphasised at the 17th Party Congress that the CCP should adopt the leading role in emancipating China, as the founder of the ‘New China’ (together with the Chinese people), and represent the interests of all social classes and ethnic minorities (China News 2007 [16th Party Congress]). It has attempted to achieve this through adaptive change. As Nathan (2003) argues, the CCP is an adaptive party which explains the resilience of the political system. Nathan (2003, 1) concludes that there are:

…four aspects of the CCP regime’s institutionalization: 1) the increasingly norm-bound nature of its succession politics; 2) the increase in meritocratic as opposed to
factional considerations in the promotion of political elites; 3) the differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime; and 4) the establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal that strengthen the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large.

**Ideological transformations**

The CCP has historically undergone three major ideological transformations in an attempt to strengthen its capacity to govern (Ma and Lin 2008). The first transformation began at the end of China’s Cultural Revolution in 1978. Hua GuoFeng reaffirmed the class-oriented ideology under the influence of Mao’s Cultural Revolution guidance and proposed the ‘Two Whatevers’ Plan (support whatever Mao decides and whatever Mao directs). In contrast, CCP reformists, such as Hu YaoBang and Deng XiaoPing, argued that ‘practice is the only criteria for judging the truth’. The first ideological battle ended at the third conference of the 11th national congress, with the inception of the ‘Open Reform’ policy which represented the first epistemological break with Maoist thought.

The second transformation began with the ‘Capitalism or Socialism’ debates in 1989 (Ma and Lin 2008). At the end of 1980s, the Conservatists in the CCP challenged the ‘Open Reform’ policy on the basis that it would lead to Capitalism. The Conservatists advocated a state-planned economy rather than market-oriented reform and criticised the policies of private ownership including ‘The Household Contract Responsibility System’ (JiaTing LianChan ChengBaoZhi). In 1992, Deng XiaoPing’s renowned ‘Southern Tour’ represented an ideological and political battle with the Conservatists in the CCP and began China’s transition from an ideologically constructed social order to an interest-based one from a political society to an economic one (Zheng 2004, 61). In 1997, the Conservative rebranded the debate between capitalism and socialism into arguments between the ‘Public’ and the ‘Private’ suspicious of the ‘Open Reform’ policy and its violation of the Marxist principle of collective ownership. The former president of the PRC, Jiang ZeMing, became the main advocate of reform in 1997 and continued to implement Deng’s legacy – the CCP needs to be more pragmatic rather than pursuing old ideologies.

Under the Presidential period of Hu Jintao, the CCP continued to adapt itself in order to increase its governing capacity. Though economic expansion has generated enormous political benefits, such as increasing the regime’s legitimacy, emerging tensions between China’s state and society, enlarging gaps between the rich and poor, increased misappropriation of land, rising income inequality, and corruption have intensified social conflict, jeopardised economic growth and undermined the CCP’s ability to govern (Tang 2010). Under these circumstances, Hu Jintao in 2003 articulated the ideology of the ‘harmonious society’ at the 16th National Congress including the promulgation of certain aspects of good governance (accountable government, the rule of law and service-oriented government) and subsequently proposed a new ideology of ‘Inclusive Growth’ at the Fifth APEC Conference in 2010. Zhu (2010) elucidates this as ‘harmonious society, social justice, governing by civil society, decreasing the gap between the rich and poor, and expanding domestic consumption needs’.
Intra-party democracy (‘Dang Nei Ming Zhu’)
The CCP has used various intra-party democratic reforms to maintain its power base and adapt to new domestic and international circumstances in the transition of China's political reform. These reforms have both empowered and disempowered groups in Chinese society (see Li 2008; Pei 2008; Yu 2008; Li 2009). As Li (2010, 1) observes, in recent years, ‘both the Chinese authorities and the state-run media have frequently used the term “intra-party democracy” to describe the introduction of institutionalised checks and balances within the CCP’. In September 2009, the Fourth Conference of the Party Congress called for the promotion of democracy within the party while intensifying the anti-corruption drive within the leadership (Reports of 17th Party Congress 2009). As Li (2010, 2) notes, ‘the directives particularly stress the importance of intra-party democracy, describing it as the “lifeblood of the Party” (dang de shengning) so as to enhance the CCP’s governing capacity’.

Xu (2009) has also argued that intra-party democracy is the solid foundation for China’s democracy development and a prerequisite for China’s people democracy (ren min mingzhu). Ding (2009) identified three components of intra-party democracy – ‘guarantee Party member’s democratic rights, improve the Party’s domestic power structure and institutionalising the Party’s democratic mechanisms’. In particular, the CCP views intra-party democracy at the grass-roots level as a way to connect the citizens with the party. Yu Keping, vice-deputy of China’s Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, also argues that intra-party democracy and people’s democracy are complementary. The former is ‘top–down’ or ‘inside–outside’ and the latter is ‘bottom–up’, but ideally they can meet in the middle (Yu 2009).

The CCP’s reforms in this area include the recruitment of economic and technical experts into the party. The CCP has, therefore, redefined its relationship with the Chinese society—a redefinition expressed in its ‘Three Represents’ slogan. First, instead of portraying itself simply as the vanguard of the proletariat, the party now claims to represent: (1) society’s ‘advanced productive forces’, meaning especially the growing urban middle class of businesspeople, professionals and high-tech specialists; (2) the promotion of ‘advanced culture’, as opposed to either ‘feudal’ traditions or modern materialism; and (3) the interests of the majority of the Chinese people (Dickson 2003, 29):

The Party has been recruiting the kind of economic and technical expertise needed to promote economic modernization. The rationale here is itself two-fold: First, the CCP wants to be connected with the types of people it needs to achieve continued growth, which is a main source of the Party’s contemporary claim to legitimate rule. Second, the CCP wants to preempt efforts by these new elites either to form their own groups in opposition to the Party, or to align with other regime opponents. (Dickson 2003, 28)

Secondly, the CCP also trains the party members annually in the party training schools in order to enhance their governing abilities (zhili neli) and ensures orderly political reform within the party. Shambaugh (2008, 827–828) argues that ‘one key element of the Party rebuilding process has been a stepped-up emphasis on mid-career training for Party and state cadres in the Party system’. The party system offers a variety of courses such as political ideology, economics, law, social culture and politics. More importantly, through these trainings, the CCP attempts to attain
the party’s complete political control and also indoctrinates intra-party democracy theories at the core of the CCP. Important as it is, the party school system is supplemented by two other national training structures: the Chinese Academy of Governance (Guojiaxingzhengxueyuan) and colleges of socialism (shehuizuyixueyuan) that train ethnic minorities.

Thirdly, as Deng Xiaoping commented: ‘Even so great a man as Comrade Mao Zedong was influenced to a serious degree by certain unsound systems and institutions, which resulted in grave misfortunes for the Party, the state and himself’ (Guo and Sun 1997, 365). Since the establishment of what has been termed the second generation leadership, Deng has transformed elite politics through a process of incremental institutionalisation (Miller 2008). Nathan (2003, 11) argues that:

The Chinese regime is in the middle of a historic demonstration of institutional stability: its peaceful, orderly transition from the so-called third generation of leadership, headed by Jiang Zemin, to the fourth, headed by Hu Jintao. Few authoritarian regimes – be they communist, fascist, corporatist, or personalist – have managed to conduct orderly, peaceful, timely, and stable successions... China’s current succession displays attributes of institutionalization unusual in the history of authoritarianism and unprecedented in the history of the PRC. It is the most orderly, peaceful, deliberate, and rule-bound succession in the history of modern China.

The process of leadership turnover and succession came under increasing pressure when the constitution of the PRC incorporated fixed term limits for top state posts in 1982 and established mandatory retirement ages for various levels within the state hierarchy (Miller 2008). For example, Hu Jintao’s path to the head of the fourth-generation leadership experienced three stages – Party General secretary, president of the state and finally chair of party and State Military Commission. Xi Jinping, the new general secretary of the CPC, has recently gone through the same process. In addition, succession to the Politburo Standing Committee is also institutionalised to prevent the cult of the personality and power abuses that occurred under Mao’s period. New appointments to the politburo and its standing committee are likely to be based on considerations of competence, representation and personality, in addition to calculations of factional loyalty, rather than purely depending on the outcomes of factionalism (Miller 2008, 71).

Fourthly, the introduction of ‘checks and balances’ in the party is another significant element in the CCP’s process of intra-party democratic reform. In recent years, the CCP has penalised or imprisoned a large number of party members as a result of violating party regulations, such as corruption and bribery. For example, the CCP dismissed Chen Liangyu, Shanghai’s party chief and a member of the politburo, for alleged involvement in a corruption scandal (Pei 2008, 229). Each year, CCP’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission investigates 170,000 CCP members and officials for various forms of wrongdoings (Pei 2008). The CCP uses domestic checks and balances to discipline party members’ behaviours and to maintain the party’s legitimacy.

**Strengthening the state’s governing capacities**

The CCP’s second rationale for political reform is to strengthen state capacity to govern through initiating a series of executive, legislative and judicial innovations.
However, as noted above, guaranteeing the CCP’s political control is an uncompro-
mised condition for conducting these reforms. For example, the adaptive party has
introduced better governance reforms to help it maintain its legitimacy. Similarly,
globalisation has become another driving force for the transformation of the state.
Zheng (2004, 187) argues that ‘despite difficulties, the Chinese state has made
enormous efforts to adjust the governance structure to accommodate globalisation
on the one hand, and facilitate the process of China’s integration into the global
system on the other’.
In addition, the Chinese government has also faced significant internal
challenges. Inequality has risen sharply across regions, sectors and social groups.
Corruption is rampant. Wong (2009, 930) observes that since the 1990s:

... popular protest grew in size and frequency, as citizens protested against excessive
fees and levies and increasingly, illegal land takings and evictions. the country has
also been rocked by a series of scandals in recent years, of which the long-running
saga of tainted milk power from Sanlu during 2007–2008, then the largest and most
reputable milk producer in the country, was only the latest in a string that went from
fake infant formula causing the death of hundreds of babies in 2004, the 2005
chemical spills into the Songhuajiang that contaminated water supplies to major
population centres in the north-east, to the mislabelling of exported chemicals that
turned toothpastes, pet food and pharmaceuticals into deadly poisons and so on.

The CCP has, therefore, attempted to strengthen the state’s capacities to grapple with
these pressures internally and externally through regulatory reform, transforming the
role of the civil service and improving the quality of public service delivery.

Market reform and bureaucratic restructuring
Sino scholars remain intrigued with the question of whether market reform will lead
to political liberalisation and eventually democracy. However, it is evident that China
still remains an authoritarian country. Zhang (2008, 2) provides a good illustration
of this observation by observing two different locations in China (Sunan and
Wenzhou), arguing that ‘different patterns of economic development have produced
distinct local-level social and political configurations, only one of which is likely to
foster the growth of democratic practices’. Wenzhou created an entrepreneur-
initiated development contributing to greater economic equality and a flatter class
structure and, in contrast, Sunan’s government-led development has created greater
inequality and a more polarised class structure (Zhang 2008, 3).

However, marketisation has triggered the transformation of the state through
bureaucratic restructuring. Since 1978, there have been six main institutional reforms
in China’s ‘Reform and Open Door’ policy.

The 1982 institutional reforms
The 1982 institutional reforms: in December 1981, in the process of downsizing the
state bureaucracy, the total number of ministries or agencies directly under the
control of the State Council was cut from 100 to 61, with regard to staff, State
Councils were reduced from 51,000 to 30,000.
The 1988 reform of the State Council
This new initiative focused on transforming administrative functions with a particular emphasis on the redesign of departments of economic management. The plan's long-term objective was to establish an administrative system that integrated the qualities of modern management with traditional characteristics of Chinese administration. In short-term goal was to balance relationship, transform functions, streamline staff, improve efficiency, overcome bureaucratization and increase the vitality and flexibility of central state organisations.

The 1993 institutional reforms
This phase of institutional reform focused on establishing an administrative system, which would underpin the socialist-oriented market economy. And the process of decentralisation allowed for a process of ‘hollowing-out’ to occur at the centre.

The 1998 institutional reforms
Significant improvements have been made during this period with regard to separating administration from enterprise management, through the successful privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and improving public management and the style of service delivery (Chai 2004).

A fifth institutional reform occurred in 2003. The central government established new departments, such as State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, China Banking Regulatory Commission, State Food and Drug Administration, State Administration of Work Safety and Coal Mine Safety, Ministry of Commerce and rename National Development and Planning Commission to National Development and Reform Commission. In addition, the total number of ministries in the State Council reduced to 28.

The recent institutional reforms in 2008 were branded as ‘Super Ministry Reforms’ (DaBuZhiGaiGe), involving the separation of decision-making, implementing and supervising power and the amalgamation of small ministries into 11 ‘super ministries’.

The sixth institutional reform aims to rebuild the state economic system to accommodate the market economy. Particularly, the establishment of the National Development and Reform Commission has been empowered with implementing the major economic innovations in China. Zheng (2004, 83) argues that ‘bureaucratic restructuring in China essentially refers to efforts to rationalise the bureaucratic state to make it more efficient’, and reduce or eliminate the shortcomings of inefficiency, dysfunction, overstaffing, degeneration and so on. ‘Every bureaucratic restructuring has aimed to provide an institutional foundation for the development of an increasingly market-oriented economy’ (2004, 84).

Decentralisation is the second most important institutional reform. In the process of state-building, the CCP’s decentralisation policies can be broadly grouped as fiscal and administrative. Fiscal decentralisation began in 1980, which permitted each provincial government to retain profits above the contracted amount for local purposes. Known as ‘eating in separate kitchens’ this fiscal reform was aimed at making provinces financially self-sufficient (Zheng 1997, 216). Provinces especially
for the coastal regions have particularly benefited from this administrative reform; for example, four Special Economic Zones were set up in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, which have enjoyed customs exemptions and preferential policy treatment to attract foreign capital (Zheng 1997, 216).

Local government has also been afforded greater autonomy than ever before, although the party has continued to use its power of patronage through the nomenclature system to control power elites (Zheng 1997, 220). This has included greater authority in investment and resource-allocation decision-making.

**Strengthening the role of politicised civil servants**

Civil service reform is designed in part to affect the behaviour of government employees, and China’s reforms have been no exception in this regard (Wang and Burns 2010). The world’s largest country, the PRC, established its civil service in 1993 when it promulgated the Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants. On 27 April 2005, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC) approved the Bill of State Civil Service Law (CSL), which became effective on 1 January 2006 (Chan and Edward 2007; Wang and Burns 2010, 58). China’s civil service reform is embedded in the CCP’s principle of the ‘Party manages the cadres’ (Dangguanganbu), and a politicised civil service is one of the most significant characteristics of the civil service reforms. The scope of the responsibilities of civil servants has been a contentious issue since the introduction of Civil Service Law in 2006. Under the Zeng Qinghong’s instructions in 2000, the most senior party official in charge of cadre and personnel management, the civil service system was opened up to party organisations to be incorporated into the state civil service. He made two main observations which informed the reform process. First, he argued that the scope of the state civil service must truly concretise the principle of party control of cadres, and second, the CSL must integrate the civil service and the existing cadre personnel management system (Chan and Edward 2007, 385).

Based on comprehensive research between 2001 and 2004, the Leading Group on Drafting the CSL conducted workshops nationwide to study the scope of the civil service in more than 20 provinces. In light of the new definition, the Leading Group classified the organisations of the central party and the State Council into three categories: ‘Units that fall with the civil service system; Units to be managed by reference to the Civil Service Law; Units that can adopt either the institute or the enterprise management system’ (Chan and Edward 2007, 390). Overall, the civil service system incorporates personnel in party organisations, the People’s Congress, the People’s Political Consultative Conferences, judicial and procuratorial organisations, personnel in democratic party organisations and state administration units at both the central and local levels.

Some scholars argue that China’s civil service reform tends to be over-politicised and incompatible with the trend of neutral civil servants in the executives, particularly under the ideology of New Public Management and decentralisation in the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Chan and Edward 2007). However, there is increasing evidence that even in Westminster-style bureaucracies, civil services are becoming more politicised with the increasing the number of units established around the Prime Minister and greater use of special advisors and task forces (Richards 2009).
In addition, the CCP’s civil service reforms established a series of procedures and rules regarding entry to the civil service, retirement, resignation, punishment and fixed-term tenures in ‘leadership positions’ (*Lindaozhiwu*) and ‘contractual positions’ (*Pingrenzhiwu*), bringing into the service competition mechanisms, supervision and monitoring and performance-based award systems. According to a senior civil servant in a leadership position, ‘this contributed to the development of a team of stable and consistent civil servants’ (Author interview 2010).

Furthermore, the CCP has also put considerably efforts into increasing the capability of civil servants through the provision of a variety of training programmes delivered under the auspices of the Organisation Department of the CCP. As one interviewee put it to us:

> I am currently studying English in Beijing Foreign Affairs University, and we are all selected by the Organisation Department of the CCP as middle level leaders. After three months of study, we will go to Singapore National University to study for a Master of Public Administration. (Author Interview 2010)

In addition, nominated ‘young leaders’, deputy director generals and director generals receive regular training programmes from both the CCP’s Party School and the Chinese Academy of Governance.

**Improving public service delivery**

Since 2003, the Chinese government has been committed to improving public service delivery. In 2010, The Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, stated that ‘social justice and equality is more shining than the Sun’ on the third session of the 11th National People’s Congress. Sun (2004, 99) argues that public services in China can be categorised as ‘administrative governmental services’, such as the administrative approval system (*Xingzhengshenpi*), profit-making services (gas, electricity and water), and non-profit-making services (social security, education and public health). As a result of deepening market reform, the Chinese government introduced ‘service-oriented government’ reform. As Yu (2008, 52) notes:

> From 2002 to 2004, the State Council abolished or adjusted 1806 items of the system, reducing the number of activities requiring administrative examination and approval by 50.1 percent. Secondly, it has implemented a ‘one-stop-shop’ service model in order to shorten procedure times and reduce administration costs. Thirdly, in an effort to clarify administrative responsibilities, it has adopted a services commitment and responsibility-investigating system that refrains from buck-passing and punishes delinquent officials.

Table 1 also argues that central government has expanded financial support for public service delivery. This has included the abolition of tuition fees for the nine-year compulsory education system in 2008, the provision of free textbooks and living expenses for students from poor families (Si 2008).9

In addition, the Chinese government has outsourced certain services through competitive tendering processes to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in an attempt to increase efficiency (Sun 2004). For example, Shang, Wu, and Wu (2005, 122) study demonstrates that NGOs are playing an important role in welfare
provision for vulnerable children. As one of our interviewees commented: ‘the role of NGOs in service provision is growing although their ability to win contracts depends on the interpersonal relationships of its head with the government’ (Author interview). At the same time, new regulatory instruments have been created to offset market failure.

The selective devolution of power to civil society

The CCP’s third rationale for political reform is to incrementally and selectively devolve power to civil society. A sociological definition of civil society would be the aggregation of many different types of social organisations, all of whom have voluntary membership (Teets 2009, 330). However, Yang (2003, 455) argues that the concept of civil society as applied to China has three basic elements: (1) autonomous individuals and civic associations in relation to the state; (2) engaged in organised activities in the public sphere; (3) but ‘outside the immediate control of the state but not entirely contained within the private sphere of the family’.

There are two contending narratives regarding whether China has entered an era of civil society building. Scholars at Beijing University argue that China has the characteristics of a civil society, such as an increasing number of NGOs and the increasing involvement of citizens in political activities and internet democracy. In contrast, scholars at Tsinghua University argue that China has no civil society as its citizens do not have freedom of association and assembly. Although the CCP has been extremely vigilant about discouraging the growth of NGOs, especially since the ‘colour revolution’ of 2004–2005 overturned autocratic governments in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, the party has, nevertheless, recognised that NGOs can play a beneficial role in society particularly in those areas where the state lacks capacity. For example, the CCP envisages civil society organisations playing a greater role in social management in the rural and less developed regions of China, such as Tibet. Yang (2010, 456) argues that:

studies of civil society in the reform-era have revealed three major areas of change that point to an emerging civil society: (1) existing forms of social organization have undergone change, new associational forms have appeared, and social organizations in general have proliferated; (2) both social organizations and individual citizens enjoy more autonomy from state power than in the pre-reform decades; (3) with the changing functions of the media and the increase in spaces for public discussion, a nascent form of public sphere has emerged.
According to official statistics from the Civil Affairs Department in 2010, there are over 400,000 registered social organisations in China. Yu, Director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, has stated that there are around 3,000,000 social organisations in China. This process of NGO building has been galvanised by the series of devastating natural disasters that China has experienced since 2008, such as the Wenchuan earthquake in which death tolls reached 100,000 and the Yushu earthquake in the north-east of QingHai province where hundreds of people passed away and thousands were injured. These natural disasters have led to the proliferation of charity services leading many analysts to speculate that relief and reconstruction efforts will strengthen civil society in China (Teets 2009, 330). Participation in relief efforts increases the capacity of civil society groups through an expanded volunteer and donor base, improved experience in project management and demonstration to the government of the crucial role that NGOs can play in reconstruction efforts.

Furthermore, the growth of business association, such as chambers of commerce in Wenzhou municipality in Zhejiang Province, suggests that such groups can play an important role in regulating the economy and aiding government without posing a threat to the authority of the CCP. Two examples of the latter are the development of ‘democratic consultation meetings’ in Wenling, Zhejiang Province, and the implementation of the ‘public recommendation and public selection’ system in parts of Sichuan and Jiangsu Provinces (Li 2008, 218).

Nonetheless, there is a consensus in Sino studies that civil society is tightly controlled by the CCP and has little leeway to execute its intentions, especially in the areas of promoting Western human rights and political frameworks. Under the current legal regulations, the Chinese government requires every NGO to place itself under the ‘professional management’ of a state organ with responsibilities in its area of work, in addition to being registered and vetted annually by the Civil Affairs Department. This is called the ‘dual management system’. However, Lu (2007, 173) challenges two mainstream views in Chinese NGO studies: ‘firstly, Chinese NGOs generally lack autonomy; secondly, within the NGO sector, popularly organised (or “bottom–up”) NGOs are relatively more autonomous than officially organised (or “top–down”) NGOs’. He further argues that: ‘officially-organized NGOs in China can enjoy a great deal of de facto autonomy’ (Lu 2007, 203), rather than being strictly regulated by its superior organisations.

There is evidence, however, that individuals and organisations have more autonomy in expressing their opinions and participating in political activities through the Internet than twenty years ago. Though the media and the Internet are still strictly controlled by the CCP, citizens do have more opportunities to be involved in consultative policy processes. Moreover, there are also various mechanisms that allow citizens to report maladministration or corrupt behaviour. As O’Brien (2001, 165) notes, ‘in recent years, appealing to state authorities through petitions in person, reporting to the media, and filing lawsuits have been the three most common methods to combat misconduct by local officials or business people closely aligned with the government’.

Perhaps the most important space for citizen participation can be found in online communication spaces, including chat rooms, listservs, newsgroups, electronic magazines, bulletin boards and so on. Discussions are common on topics such as political reform and social inequality. For example, there are a large number of
websites and forums on the web, providing the space for citizens to evaluate Chinese political life, such as the website of ‘China Elections and Governance’, and ‘China Reforms’. In addition, China’s online spaces serve as a good mechanism for articulating social problems as a means to link the private sphere with the political centre (Yang 2003, 463). Furthermore, the Internet has also heightened the public profile of social organisations. Yang (2003, 466) concludes that ‘existing social organizations use the Internet for publicity, recruitment, fund-raising, and public education; of particular interest are the growing number of environmental groups and NGOs in China’.

Notably, the number of popular protests in China has increased, although it is striking that most of these are not targeted at government. Since 1999, the official ‘People’s Daily Online’ set up a BBS called the Protest Forum for internet users to air discontent as a result of the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia by NATO. Unexpectedly, this triggered a popular protest on the Internet. Subsequent protests have included an environmental protest in Xiamen 2007, and more recently, protests against the Japanese government over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In both cases, the Internet and smart phones have played a crucial role in social mobilisation.

Experiments in community governance – sowing the seeds of democracy?

On 5 September 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met the former American President James Carter, and commented that:

> direct election at the village level is an important part of China’s political reform, and the ultimate goal of villager self-rule is to enhance the citizens’ ability to manage state affairs. If villagers can successfully handle village affairs, then it can be extended to a town, county, province and the state.\(^{12}\)

The above comments reflect the fourth rationale for political reform – experimentation with democratic governance at the local level to investigate whether democracy can be embedded within Chinese political and societal culture. Village elections are regarded as the core of a widely publicised ‘basic-level’ programme of political reforms.

The first aim of experimenting with direct elections at the village level is to identify the model of democracy that best fits Chinese culture. Some scholars state that villagers’ self-rule is an experimental form of democracy with Chinese characteristics, and others argue that the CCP is trying to create a ‘developmental democracy’ characterised first by institutionalising procedures resembling a democratic system and then incrementally raising the level of democracy involved through more openness and competition (Alpermann 2004, 197).

The Chinese government began to promote villagers’ self-rule (cunmin zizhi) countrywide in 1998, and the ‘Villagers’ Committee’ (cunmin weiyuanhui) that originated as a grass-roots institutional innovation was made the key component of the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committee of the People’s Republic of China. This approach had previously been trialled in 1987. The Organic Law set out to enforce villagers’ self-rule in all rural areas. It stipulates that the Villagers’ Committee is a
self-ruling grass-roots organisation by which villagers manage their own affairs, and educate and serve themselves.

The law formulates a clear objective of promoting grass-roots democracy in rural China, and emphasises ‘democratic elections’ (minzhu xuanju) and ‘democratic supervision’ (minzhu jiandu) of the Villagers’ Committee, through ‘democratic decision-making’ and ‘democratic management’. The Organic Law provides an institutional framework for enhancing cadre accountability as well as empowering ordinary villagers to make their own decisions, thereby improving village leadership and grass-roots governance. Villagers are entitled to directly choose among themselves those who are impartial, honest and upright, and public-spirited to be chairman, vice-chairman and members of their Villagers’ Committee in free, fair and periodic elections.

A second aim of experimenting with direct elections at the village level is to cultivate a citizenship consciousness. Activities conducted by Village Committee are not viewed as potentially damaging to the ruling position of the CCP but seen as an autonomous organ to assist villagers to participate in village affairs. Many scholars (see Chen 2005; Li 2009) believe that grass-roots-level democracy in the Chinese villages has led to the development of a citizenship consciousness. However, the CCP still controls the election process at the grass-roots level so as to maintain the CCP’s politically dominant position and retain social stability. As a Party–State system, there is an unavoidable trend of conflict between ‘the two committees’ – the Village Committee and the Party Committee. Indeed the potential for conflict is inscribed in the Organic Law. On the one hand, it states that Party branches are ‘obliged to support villagers in developing self-governance and exercising their democratic rights’, and on the other hand, it notes that Party branches are the villages’ ‘leadership core’ (Lingdao Hexin). In sum, the local party secretary remains dominant. The reforms of CCP at the base of the PRC’s political system are driven by the need to find a balance between democratic participation and citizens’ rights on the one hand and state and party authority on the other (Alpermann 2004, 198). The CCP reluctantly gives its citizens enhanced opportunities for political participation but only if it serves to strengthen its authority in rural society. This approach is crystallised in the following extract from a speech made by Wu Bangguo to the NPC in 2009 in which he stated that ‘China would draw on the achievements of all cultures and would not simply copy the West; Communist Party leadership should be strengthened and the correct political orientation followed’.13

In conclusion – the adaptive Chinese state
The popular perception that the twenty-first century is the Asian Century is unquestionably a tribute to China’s remarkable economic development. But at the same time, the CCP is encountering unprecedented unrest exacerbated by social and regional economic disparities and the omnipresence of socially accepted forms of corruption. While China’s economic project has been an unmitigated success, its social and political projects have been lacklustre undermining the ruling legitimacy of the CCP. Indeed, as we have seen, the latest wave of reforms have an adaptive quality which will not threaten the CCP’s dominant position rather they will strengthen the state’s capacity to govern through the selective devolution of power both to civil society and local representative institutions under the control of local
party organs. It is difficult to see, however, how this approach will contribute to the long-term stability of the Chinese model. As Confucius once said, ‘To approach a task from the wrong end can lead to nothing but trouble’ (The Analects 2.16).

Notes

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