

Classifying the PRC Regime under Hu Jintao & Wen Jiabao

ABSTRACT: The unclassifiability of the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) is nothing short of an assault on the discipline of political science. Nomothetic theoretical demands nudge China into a slew of widely, even wildly divergent categories, and the apparently simple dichotomy between democracy and non-democracy has begun to blur in the past decade. This essay dives head first into the sea of political taxonomy and finds that a majority of scholars emphasize the Leninist hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or attach adjectives to Chinese authoritarianism, but even the stability-obsessed decade of Hu and Wen's leadership has been insufficient to fix the PRC in a consensual categorical crosshairs.

**What kind of state is Hu & Wen's PRC?** As the world's eyes focus in greater and greater numbers on political developments in mainland China, everyone sees a different picture, ranging from an unchanged totalitarian state to a differently defined democracy, with all manner of regimes in between. Each piece of prose in the burgeoning field of "China-watching" must make a daunting decision about how to classify the PRC regime--or commit "intellectual surrender" to idiographic status, fundamental contradictions, and teleology with an indeterminate, mixed, or transitional label.<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts to define and aggregate the regime types which scholarly writing has applied to the PRC from approximately 2002-2012, while led by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. It begins with a consideration of what political regimes are to modern nation-states, followed by a section on recent Chinese history's challenges to definitions of regimes and regime change. For a factual base of this essay's titular goal, Hu and Wen are briefly introduced, while the bulk of the content seeks to match their term of leadership with a single, commonly used regime type. Inevitably failing to do so, the final section provides results of an informal survey of how scholars have labeled the PRC since about 2000, with single-party Leninism and aggregated authoritarianism as the clear, but hardly overwhelming favorites. Based on these inconclusive exercises, the essay ends by questioning the possibility of valid categorization and the benefits of idiographic accuracy.

Lest the goal of this essay be seen as esoteric pedantry, some justifications are in order. The categorization of regimes is important for several reasons, not just for the purposes of political science. Regime labels often carry normative value judgments which underscore and enable rhetoric, in turn justifying policies which may be favorable or punitive. So strong is the near-universal, normative democratic bias, the only regime distinction which matters for

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Fewsmith, pg. 162, at the beginning of the section entitled "What Type of System Is This?", is not very convincing in justifying the odd label of "quasi-formalized" rather than the "intellectual surrender" of a "mixed system".

some is dichotomous, between democracies and non-democracies. Contrarily, this essay argues that the many understudied and distinct forms of authoritarian and totalitarian regime types have very important effects on their nation-states and populations.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is necessary to establish categories which are both detailed and accurate as “starting points”, as the number of distinct categories sets the terms for all-important questions of when regime change occurs.

**Regimes.** A regime, often equated with a political system, can be narrowly described as the “rules of the game” by which leaders and the government come to power and govern. Narrowly, it may not include more than the procedural facts of how the leader of the state is selected.<sup>3</sup> This essay prefers to use a broader definition, one which takes into consideration the roles of ideology and the masses in the political process, much like those who advocate for the study of democracy to look beyond “free and fair elections” to commonly held democratic values. In explicit terms, this essay will consider institutions and styles of leadership, the presence of ideological legitimacy, the roles of the ruling party and the masses, stated national goals, and specific institutions in coming to a conclusion on the Hu/Wen tenure of the CCP regime.<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era, every nation-state must have a regime, a political system which outlines the methods of governing the territory. Some scholars, such as Suisheng Zhao<sup>5</sup>, remain hesitant even to bestow or denigrate China with statehood, instead finding some affinities with more polemical accounts calling China an empire, or the long-enduring nationalist belief that China represents civilization itself. If either of these alternatives were to gain traction in mainstream, scholarly accounts, the regime question might dissolve in the face of China’s non-fungibility, a admitted

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<sup>2</sup> That the commonly used regime rating metrics of Freedom House and Polity register hardly a quiver away from the “unfree” pole makes one grateful that these weren’t around in the old revolutionary days, when China truly would have tipped the scales. Again, I would assert that the political changes from Mao to Deng would resonate far more with the average Chinese citizen than a shift of multiple points on these continua.

<sup>3</sup> Comparative studies of selection methods unsurprisingly favor democratic elections as the worst method, “except for all the others”, but more attention could certainly be paid to the “selectorates” coined by Bueno de Mesquita, dynastic and hereditary succession, seniority within parties creating clear lines of succession, and even the non-institution of brute force in power vacuums and other non-institutionalized systems. The expectation that all of these latter forms would disappear in the modern era, or even the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has clearly not yet come to pass.

<sup>4</sup> Already, the issue of how to treat the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China must be raised. As the two are so closely intertwined, this essay will alternate between calling the regime in question that of the CCP or PRC. The CCP is clearly the ruling party of the state known as the PRC, and issues of what the latter includes territorially will be deliberately eschewed. Generally, all states are categorized by their regime, but only in a “party-state” such as the contemporary PRC could the ruling party be virtually interchangeable with the regime (though still not quite the name of the state itself, for the elitist nature including only a small minority of the population in its “vanguard”). Whether state leaders could be someone who is not a member of the CCP without changing the official name of the state is dubious, and the still unresolved question of what China is (a civilization, an empire, a nation-state, a nation, or just a useful but problematic construct) adds yet another layer of complications. Again, however, these questions are not the focus of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> On pg. 34, Zhao lowers the shields of political correctness and calls China “the last great multi-ethnic trans-continental empire left in the world.”

possibility more sensitive to reality than analytical expedience. For the sake of argument and acceptance of status quo designations, we therefore take China to be a state—perhaps not like any other, but a state through and through. Treating China as either an empire or civilization, however titillating the temptation, does not yield enough empirical or analytical insights to be worth the trouble.

Especially in the post-Mao era of reforms, all studies of China must decide on a regime label and justify it, a task which has become increasingly tenuous, qualified, and even avoided entirely for fears that misplacement in a category would taint whatever point the author has to make. There is limited categorical consensus overall, and the previous decade of CCP leadership has sparked much debate as to the nature of the regime: are its changes small or fundamental, toward or away from democracy, purposeful or simply pragmatically disconnected attempts to maintain a grip on power? A central point of this essay is that the many misunderstandings about the PRC, whether international or among scholars and the growing group of “China watchers”, stem from the difficulty of categorizing the regime neatly. Whether due to an inherently idiographic status or the long and somewhat incoherent era of reform, conversations about the country are often contentious from the start, as each may have a fundamentally different view of what the CCP regime has meant to China, where the party intends to lead it.

**Regime changes within recent Chinese history.** China presents a special challenge to categorization for having had wild swings in ideology and leadership style while ostensibly under the same “regime”, continuously led by the CCP.<sup>6</sup> In the basic sense, most regime changes involve either differences of type (i.e. from authoritarian to democratic, totalitarian to post-totalitarian, etc.) or of the specific leader or group of leaders who have replaced the previous one(s) without changing the regime type (i.e. new lineages often took over monarchies and dynasties while keeping the same hereditary succession rules).<sup>7</sup> In what may initially seem unique to communist regimes, this essay

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<sup>6</sup> Historians such as William C. Kirby, in Goldman and Gordon, even find strong continuities between the GMD/KMT of Chiang Kai-shek and the CCP which might call into question the very concept of regime change. While both certainly had similar goals of national unity and strength, economic development, not to mention comparably non-democratic, coercive means of working toward these goals, in blurring the distinction between the nationalists and the communists, Dorothy Solinger has suggested that historians conveniently leave out distinctive institutions, ideologies, and the finer points of how the two actually governed. In short, while similarities should be noted and questioning basic assumptions is always fruitful, those who deny that 1949 was the beginning of something very new in China will have very little use for this essay or the utility of regime categories in general.

<sup>7</sup> In the modern era, changes of the latter type are more difficult to identify, unless, say, nuances of different authoritarian leaders are discounted. In the eyes of powerless or apolitical subjects and citizens, however, such changes may understandably mean very little. For example, a casual observer might find little to distinguish South Korea under Park’s pre-“president for life” republic from the following one under Chun Doo Hwan (especially if viewed through a dichotomous democracy-centric lens).

holds as a central claim, succession of a differently-styled top leader within the same regime, or a major reform of the political system which nonetheless keeps the same rulers, should both also be considered regime changes.<sup>8</sup>

Note that such changes are rarely so stark, especially in a state as large as the PRC. Even so dramatic a reform as the change from a planned to free-market economy could not in itself constitute a *political* regime change, and this ongoing project may never be completed. An institutional change from appointments to elections, by contrast, could be implemented comparatively quickly and across the entire system, at a considerable but probably smaller cost. While such changes began to be tried in rural areas soon after the Reform era began, virtually no one has called local elections a national regime change. Only nationwide elections for top leadership positions could accomplish that, and scholarly observers generally believe these to be at least an intermediate step of “intra-party democracy” away or possibly not in store at all.<sup>9</sup>

For analytical purposes, these labels will be applied to mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders of China, with necessary simplification and streamlining of the longer eras under Mao and Deng, exclusion of the civil war from 1945-9 and “flash in the wok” Hua Guofeng. A judgment is also given as to whether a regime change occurred. While these designations are based on leadership, more nuanced versions might focus on policy and constitutional changes, as well as dividing Mao and Deng’s time at the helm into something short of infinite categorical regress.

LEADER/ERA	REGIME TYPE	REGIME CHANGE FROM PREV.?
“Nanjing Decade” of RoC under Chiang	Authoritarian	Yes (warlords were a non-regime)
PRC under Mao	Totalitarian, Communist	Yes (for high communism/Maoism)
PRC under Deng	Post-totalitarian, Communist, “Pragmatic”/Reformist, ???	Yes (for succession questions, de-emphasizing ideology)
PRC under Jiang (& Zhu)	Post-totalitarian or Authoritarian?	No (more a continuation than change)
PRC under Hu & Wen	TBA	No (followed similar succession)
PRC under Xi & Li	TBA	Probably not

FIGURE 1: Recent regimes in China. The third column asks whether the “Leader/Era” column marks a regime change from the previous “Leader/Era”. Such labels are naturally contentious and overly-simplistic, but they are also only preliminary attempts to consider whether basic categories were more appropriate in China’s modern past than in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are not the primary focus of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> In the American democratic context, a change of ruling party is seen as a normal, frequent event, and thus referred to as simply a change of government or administration. Change of ruling party is rarely accomplished in non-democratic regimes without a fundamental restructuring of the polity (not to mention violence). Especially if the previous political system had lasted a long time or seemed fairly stable, changes in the rules of the game may actually be less drastic or substantive than if an extremist party came to power in a democratic system.

<sup>9</sup> Several Chinese scholars even suggest that elections within the party would make popular elections unnecessary, even an undesirably messy expense. Of the Western scholars who mention the concept, most apparently see it as a transitional marker of becoming a hybrid regime, only a partial reform toward the ultimate, normatively preferred goal.

**Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.** This section outlines the major policies and events which occurred under the tenure of Hu and Wen. It should first be noted that the status of the top CCP leaders has never been as much of a duo. While Zhu Rongji had considerable influence as premier under Jiang, both Wen's popularity and calls for political reform make him a significant factor in matters of regime classification. Of course, this could also be a reflection of Hu's relative weakness, and there is certainly no guarantee that the leadership of President-select Xi will be as obviously two-pronged or "liberal".

In terms of succession, the major factor in classifications under the minimal regime definition, many authors note the far greater rule-governed, "elaborately designed" process both Hu and now Xi Jinping have undergone. Lam's account leaves plenty of room for "skullduggery" and clearly finds Hu's posturing strategic, even mildly cynical or devious.<sup>10</sup> While Huang's chapter in Li's 2008 volume describes it more as a compromise and consensus-laden "game of competitive coexistence", it finds more affinities with the account of Bo Zhiyue, who often publishes credible "insider accounts" of elite Chinese politics. Bo goes so far as to describe the now twice-established process of CCP presidential succession as an "institutionalized Hu Jintao model" in which one upwardly mobile candidate is selected, groomed, and put through a series of formalities to "succeed" as smoothly as possible, however without being completely explicit.<sup>11</sup>

Major domestic events, policies, and accomplishments of the Hu & Wen decade include (in rough chronological order): admission to the WTO, SARS and bird flu, agricultural tax reform, an anti-secession law, major anti-Japanese nationalist protests, an anti-corruption campaign buttressed by the "eight honors and eight shames", the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, the Beijing Olympics, ethnic protest and riots in both Tibet and Xinjiang, the Shanghai World Expo, commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the awarding of a Nobel Peace Prize to a dissident "criminal", and just recently, the first major purge of a politburo member/standing committee candidate Bo Xilai (perhaps feared for reinstating Maoist politics). Unlike dictatorial predecessors, many perceive Hu to be relatively weak, an inter-related result of lacking his own loyal "clique" and apparently reacting to events as often as preemptively enacting policies of his own design.<sup>12</sup>

With these factors in mind, the role of each leader in bringing them about or responding to them, this essay must also consider Hu and Wen's statements on national objectives and ideological matters. Five-year plans and white papers from the past ten years have largely focused on making China's impressive economic growth more sustainable

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<sup>10</sup> See Lam's first chapter for the detailed, if opinionated "Rise of Hu Jintao" and his "most uneasy relationship" with the outgoing Jiang Zemin.

<sup>11</sup> See Bo (2010), pg. 396-7, for modeled applications and predictions for Xi Jinping in addition to Hu.

<sup>12</sup> As the section on totalitarianism will argue, however, Hu has by no means failed to introduce ideological slogans.

and equitable, though it is unclear how effective or sincere measures to realize these goals have been. Indeed, other than the tax reform, concrete examples of popular or democratizing (in the sense of showing responsiveness to popular demands) policies are rather sparse in Western media accounts.<sup>13</sup>

On the grounds of the major goals, ideologies, and leadership styles of Hu and Wen, the following sections will evaluate this ten-year period with regard to how each fits or contradicts the central characteristics of several basic regime types: Leninist Party-states, Totalitarianism, Post-totalitarianism, Authoritarianism, Dictatorship/Autocracy, Liberal Democracy, and Mao Zedong's "New Democracy".

**Leninist Party-States.** The most applicable label to the history of the PRC is that of a Leninist party-state, but it remains fairly obscure to those outside the field of political science. In fact, even within the field this form has received little theoretical attention since its exaggerated demise after the Cold War, outside of the Chinese context. While shifting with the leadership styles of particular chairmen and presidents, a party-state can accommodate each and center the CCP as the nexus of political power throughout a tumultuous history.<sup>14</sup>

Given its status as the regime type du jour of scholarly China-watchers, there is surprisingly little consideration of how the clear ideological divisions within the CCP affect its current categorization or the country's future. What would it take for the PRC to cease being a "party-state"? Would nothing less than the emergence of a legitimate or viable opposition party do away with this label as well as the related "one-party system"?<sup>15</sup> Or would a sufficiently divided single party render this distinction meaningless—as the CCP might retain complete control of politics but be quite incapable of crafting coherent policies? Until these empirical markers of real change are agreed upon, consideration of causation may be premature.

Given the "hegemonic" status of the CCP, the anticipated advent of "intraparty democracy" is often given as an answer to these questions, a much-hyped innovation which would either herald the coming of actual democracy by

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<sup>13</sup> See Jeffries' 2012 volume and thousand-page tome for an exhaustive compilation of all "political developments" important enough to be covered by Western media. A brief survey confirms Chinese nationalist claims that we in Western media don't have a lot nice to say about the PRC, a bias which can be defended by noting the almost monotonously positive or toothless accounts in the PRC's domestic press.

<sup>14</sup> One might argue that both Mao and Deng were powerful, dictatorial enough to transcend the party or rule the country by fiat. Mao in particular seemed willing to mold and purge party members and the CCP itself at will. This would, however, be disqualification by technicality rather than fundamental contradiction, as Leninism's name itself implies the necessity of a strong head of state. It could then be argued whether Mao and Deng represent a more Leninist PRC for being dictatorial, or if Jiang and Hu do so for being only in the highest position within a single, dominant party. Dickson's treatment of the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan dispels any notion that Marxist ideology needs to play a role in such a regime, so again, it's a toss-up which "intra-CCP regimes" were more Leninist.

<sup>15</sup> Solinger (2001) lists six factors present in three countries, Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico, which recently transitioned from being a one-party state. Notably, only semi-free local elections (1) and high levels of corruption (4) could be said to be present in the PRC.

splitting the party roughly in half or make electoral democracy unnecessary. Not surprisingly, Western scholars treatment of such a hypothetical regime as a “hybrid” suggest that this could hardly be more than a temporary, transitional form. A survey of Chinese scholars, understandably suspicious about the manipulability and messiness of national elections, suggests that intraparty democracy may well precede a full transition, but may as well be the end point of political reforms in China.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, the wide applicability of the Leninist party-state over the course of PRC history may be partially attributed to its limited specificity and minimal use by less scholarly texts. Like most regime labels applied over multiple decades, its durability requires smoothing over significant changes. If a Leninist party-state can either have a powerful dictator or be subject to collective, consensual rule by a party more powerful than top leaders, there is very little to distinguish this category from authoritarianism, except perhaps a legacy of communism.<sup>17</sup> The communist question will always hang over the CCP, and in the next section, we will consider whether totalitarianism would still be an apt designation, perhaps better for its narrower definition.

**Totalitarianism.** Juan Linz’s seminal book comparing totalitarian to authoritarian regimes serves as the theoretical foundation for many of the following distinctions. Almost inevitably, the term now seems dated, tied to the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century eras of high fascism, socialism, and communism. That the label only fits one contemporary regime fairly well, that of North Korea, should lead us to question whether it is still a useful term.

Elements required to be a totalitarian regime, as outlined by Friedrich<sup>18</sup> and later echoed by Linz’s 1975 chapters are as follows: “1) a totalist ideology; 2) a single party committed to this ideology and usually led by one man, the dictator; 3) a fully developed secret police; and three kinds of...monopolistic control: ...a) mass communications; b) operational weapons; c) all organizations, including economic ones, thus involving a centrally planned economy.” Linz’s 2000 update notes that even North Korea is not a perfect fit, “where totalitarianism seems to combine with sultanistic

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<sup>16</sup> For arguments that the CCP is a democratizing force, if halting and reluctant, see Zheng and Lye’s chapter in Lye’s 2011 edited volume, *Political Parties, Party Systems, and Democratization in East Asia*.

<sup>17</sup> If taken as a corporatist model of the kind described by Mary Gallagher (Ch.13 in Alagappa, “The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State”), communism is only optional, as other dominant parties have certainly existed which often found ideological legitimacy by being anti-communist. Again, Chiang’s revitalized KMT serves as the clearest, closest example. Perhaps “corporatist” might serve as an alternative to “Leninist”, describing similar state structures, without the implication of a communist past but with similar points of compatibility with totalitarianism.

<sup>18</sup> Pg. 126

elements.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, lack of a party might disqualify the DPRK under element 2), while the PRC at certain points was spot on.

Certain authors with axes to grind on the PRC still refer to it as totalitarian. Terrill, Sorman, and Mann’s books are each exemplary of the view that China hasn’t really changed, that until political reforms at very least catch up to the freedom of the economy, Western countries should not treat China much differently than communists in the Cold War era. In Mann’s words, U.S. policy-makers are falling for a deceptive, “soothing” story that the PRC is slowly transitioning to democracy, that a few, repressive bumps in the road to full reform are inevitable. Every time a dissident is jailed, a protest put down, or a news story censored, these narratives become prominent in the Western press and countered by Chinese nationalists on websites like anti-CNN.com. Such discourses are, in short, polemic and inflammatory, just as the labels “totalitarian” and “communist” themselves retain pejorative connotations.

Is it possible to identify elements of the contemporary PRC regime which remain totalitarian, without offending nationalist sensibilities? Presumably, an examination of the continuing role of ideology in the PRC could do so, briefly. Some, such as Andrew Nathan, have claimed that the CCP’s ideology is “bankrupt”<sup>20</sup>, while others have taken the decline in both use and belief in communism in both the party and among the population as evidence that most recent decade should be characterized as pragmatic authoritarianism, without an over-arching ideology to legitimize the regime. This essay finds it more accurate to say that, while communist ideology has been toned down<sup>21</sup>, others have been elevated in importance to CCP legitimacy and national goals. Virtually every treatment of Chinese nationalism has noted the party’s explicit and “necessary” connection with the “new China”, and grand policy statements of the Hu and Wen decade such as China’s “peaceful rise/development”, “harmonious society”, and “scientific development” each have a distinctly ideological air about them. In national terms, unity, irredentism, and righting the wrongs which befell the nation under the “100 years of humiliation” certainly have motivational qualities, but these must be carefully managed and shaped to support the regime itself, their potentially destabilizing tendencies counteracted even at the cost of seeming insufficiently patriotic.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, if any regime could lay claim to an ugly neologism such as “stability-ism”—as close to a totalist ideology as imaginable, however almost universal among non-democratic states—it would be Hu Jintao’s PRC.

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<sup>19</sup> Linz (2000), pg. 35

<sup>20</sup> Nathan, pg. 13

<sup>21</sup> Gilley (2004) predicts that the CCP will eventually have to change its name to stay in power if all vestiges of Marxism fade from governance, but as the ideology retains much utility among areas of ethnic conflict, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, regardless of actual policy, it seems more likely that the Chinese population will continue to live with this contradiction.

<sup>22</sup> As when calling for anti-Japanese protesters to be orderly or return home, even discouraging nonviolent acts such as boycotts.

To be a “moderately comfortable”, *xiaokang*, society is rather less inspiring than socialist utopia, but it is likely also a great deal more attainable, blurring the distinction between an ideology and an objective. Similarly, each of 1)-3) and a)-c) seems to have diminished greatly if comparing the ten-year term of Hu and Wen to that of Mao. That each also still exists, however lessened, fragmented, or de-emphasized, would suggest that a label of pure authoritarianism is inappropriate, unless used to capture all non-democratic variation. Indeed, by standards outlined in theoretical texts, the contemporary PRC seems at first glance an excellent example of a post-totalitarian state.

**Post-totalitarianism and Authoritarianism.** If the newly emphasized ideologies mentioned in the previous section are insufficient to be totalitarian, as most would agree they aren’t unified or deeply penetrating enough, current sociopolitical conditions likely point to one of these highly comparable types. Post-totalitarianism is the major conceptual contribution of Linz & Stepan’s 1996 book, an inherently unstable and explicitly transitional category which doesn’t apply nearly so well to the PRC as a universal category might pretend. The first and foremost objection to its applicability in contemporary China is the length of time spent under this temporary regime. If this began with the reforms of the Post-Mao era, requiring beforehand an equation of the first 30 years of the PRC as totalitarian, the 30 years since either vastly exceed Linz & Stepan’s theoretical time span or explain the CCP’s obsession with stability very well.

Many aspects of post-totalitarianism fit Deng and Jiang’s 1980’s and ‘90’s better than Hu & Wen’s decade, but can still be seen today. Stepan and Linz divide this form into several arenas: pluralism, ideology, mobilization, and leadership. Depending on one’s assessment of each of these four dimensions, 2002 to 2012 can take on appearances of either a “frozen” or “mature” post-totalitarian form.<sup>23</sup> When referring to a “second culture” outside the party-state, crass materialism is probably more apparent (and state-condoned) than political dissidence, as people are understandably more eager to gain and flaunt disproportionate wealth once reserved for cadre elites than to be put under state surveillance as a “troublemaker”. Pro-democracy liberals are undoubtedly growing in number, but such views are still dangerous or forbidden in public and mass media outlets. Especially as nationalist elements bolster old ideologies, the requirement that the “official canon [be] seen as an obligatory ritual”<sup>24</sup>, little believed but unquestionable, doesn’t seem particularly apt as China rises. Studying Marxism itself may generate “more boredom than enthusiasm”, but several factors including economic performance and perceptions of being held back or slighted internationally ensure that the

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<sup>23</sup> Stepan & Linz, pg. 42, note that an “early” stage simply consists of the top leader’s position being weaker than in the past, but otherwise “close to the totalitarian ideal”. The frozen form can be adapted to the contemporary PRC both for aforementioned reasons of longevity without obvious democratization and for control mechanisms which obviously continue today. In its mature form, the only sure thing is that “politically the leading role of the official party is still sacrosanct”.

<sup>24</sup> Stepan & Linz, pg. 48.

central government receives plenty of enthusiastic support, even for its non-charismatic but genuinely well-liked president and premier.<sup>25</sup>

In a final point against the next type, Linz and Stepan note that high level positions in authoritarian regimes often must co-opt powerful groups which already exist to legitimize themselves, while the CCP's top leadership is almost entirely promoted from within. The only segment of contemporary Chinese society which might fit that description and recent history are the barons of the private sector. While the PRC's rising private entrepreneurs are clearly powerful, they were allowed into the CCP under Jiang—an apparently contradictory reform which would only cause an ideological collapse of communist credibility if the party were still revolutionary—and none has yet risen to unseat the politically unassailable princeling class from either the Politburo or big business. In short, unless “red capitalism” gives way to neoliberal *laissez-faire*, the relationship appears to be in symbiotic balance rather than a full concession to the other's power.

Authoritarianism is woefully under-studied and problematically inclusive of many vastly different regimes now in existence. Samuel Huntington can be given much credit for the popularization of the term as the dichotomous alternative to democracy, but he was rare among prominent Western scholars for seeing the functions, endurance, and even advantages of this regime type. There is little room for analytical depth in a dichotomy, but anyone who can make sense of Linz's “typology of authoritarian regimes” on pg. 175 is a far better scholar than I. For simplicity sake, authoritarianism is here defined as encompassing all regimes which are non-democratic, have little or no legitimizing ideology other than the tautological and self-described “need” for an authoritarian system, and depoliticized masses who are either discouraged from participating in politics or have little interest in doing so (perhaps because the only permitted channels for participation are explicitly regime-supporting, entailing acts most citizens would not commit unless coerced).

If the current PRC regime is indeed authoritarian, as a plurality of scholars suggest, this essay has argued that it retains very clear roles for ideology and mass participation.<sup>26</sup> Political participation is a useful point of contention for distinguishing between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, and in the case of nationalist protest, it seems the real potential for these to become disorderly has outweighed their potential to support CCP legitimacy. Whereas a

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<sup>25</sup> Both Hu & Wen also perfectly fit the bill as “more bureaucratic and state technocratic”, Linz & Stepan, pg. 47.

<sup>26</sup> If anything, relative freedom of speech (compared to the past, as long as it's not challenging the CCP) has made PRC citizens more political under the current system, not less. Meanwhile, most Taiwanese I've met, who've lived nearly a generation under a democratic system and presumably have virtually no restrictions on speech, are reluctant even to engage me in political discussion (a very small sample on the Taiwanese side, I admit, but anyone who says PRC citizens just want to get rich and don't care about politics hasn't asked them about Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, or Xinjiang).

totalitarian state organizes “mass movements” and mandates that citizens participate, it seems the CCP under Hu and Wen has been content to echo some nationalist views while grudgingly tolerating their manifestations in the streets, even discouraging them in the destabilizing category of “mass incidents” when the line of violence is crossed. In the optimistic words of Bill Chou, the CCP still welcomes, encourages, and organizes mass political events and participation generally<sup>27</sup>; authoritarianism is only evident when such events become disorderly, in need of control or even the crackdowns of Hu’s “strike hard” campaigns against ethnic separatism in the far West.

**Dictatorship/Autocracy.** The distinctions to be made between this category and authoritarianism are two: the number of decision-makers and the normative element. A dictatorship requires a single, puissant potentate, and the focus on him (almost always a male) makes for a conveniently negative contrast to democracy. Perhaps tied initially to totalitarian states, this form gained wider applicability when a number of states with an all-powerful top leader remained after the fall of communism. Sometimes taking on what Linz & Stepan refer to as a “sultanistic” (personalist) character, this essay wishes to consider this form with the possibility that not all autocratic regimes exist solely for the benefit of the dictator himself.

In particular, the rule of Hu and Wen can be viewed as antithetical to dictatorship, the leadership categorizing attempt of a prominent German shoe-thrower notwithstanding.<sup>28</sup> Under this duo more than any previous leaders, the dominance of the party over the top leader is manifest. Whether due to ideological splits within the CCP or personal weaknesses of Hu and Wen—for failure to build their own factions to a preponderance—the top posts have never appeared weaker or less able to implement their agendas. Due in part to growing dissent, “mass incidents”, and ethnic strife during his tenure, Hu has arguably seemed little more than reactionary at times, voicing and acting on party consensus rather than on personal convictions or a distinctive leadership style. Much avoidance of the dictator label can also be attributed to the PRC’s massive international campaign to soften its image, heralding its accomplishments and spreading its own soft power with cultural promotion in global Confucius Institutes. With such efforts reaching more minds beyond China’s borders, framing the PRC as already a distinctly Chinese form of democracy becomes possible and worthy of consideration.

**Liberal and Mao Zedong’s “New Democracy”.** Tianjian Shi, in both his China chapter in Chu et. al’s *How East Asians View Democracy* and a forthcoming book, notes that the Chinese definition of democracy is given as

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<sup>27</sup> See his 2009 book, *Government and Policy-making Reform in China*.

<sup>28</sup> On a visit to the University of Cambridge in the UK in 2009, an audience member threw his shoe at Wen Jiabao, calling him a lying dictator as he was escorted out of the auditorium.

“unknown” by more than a third of survey respondents, inextricable as in many other countries from the concept of “good governance”, and possibly even intertwined in China’s case with the decidedly undemocratic concept of guardianship.<sup>29</sup> From the moment the topic is introduced, then, definitional disparities may be irreconcilable for a question as large as a national regime’s category. This section nonetheless endeavors to find democratic elements within the current political system, beginning with the progressive values thought to be promoted by a democratic political culture.

As popular elections do not determine national leadership in the PRC, there is no need to consider it in terms of being an “electoral democracy”. Instead of a procedural distinction, however, the value-centered distinction of being “liberal” is not categorically excluded. If human rights and civil liberties continue to improve, as most would say has occurred over the course of the reform era, the PRC might one day find itself promoting liberal values of tolerance to a still-highly conservative society. It is even conceivable that the value dimensions of “liberal democracy” may precede procedural requirements.<sup>30</sup> While political asylum-seekers aren’t exactly lining up at China’s border, there are certainly much less pleasant countries to live in, as influxes of North Koreans and Burmese in the past decade attest.<sup>31</sup>

Mao’s “New Democracy” is a rare case of communist propaganda being vindicated or substantiated by an increasingly responsive, unelected central government. The political center’s popularity from economic performance and perceived virtue compared to corrupt local cadres flirts with democratic legitimacy and undoubtedly has won many believers in the reform era. Coined explicitly in dialectic response to the democracies of the West, this uniquely claimed form of democracy still dominates current mass media. Defined as a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat as represented by the CCP and superior to “Western” or “bourgeois” forms, it is virtually never considered on its own terms in Western scholarship, treated instead as a propagandistic justification for Party rule. Its continued relevance may be questionable, but it certainly continues to create cognitive dissonance whenever the CCP mentions democracy—

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<sup>29</sup> See the comparative country table 1.3 on the “meaning of democracy” in Chu et. al, pg. 12, the book generally for the “good government” conflation. Guardianship entails an acknowledgement that elites, if virtuous, will serve the people and represent popular interests without needing to consult or be elected by the masses, and dyed-in-the wool Confucians may still believe something similar to it (but also that corrupt leadership must be overthrown).

<sup>30</sup> In many regards, such as admittedly authoritarian affirmative action for minorities (i.e. college entrance quotas, exemption from 1-child policy), the CCP regime has been decidedly more progressive than the majority of its population might prefer. Gay marriage may not be so far off the CCP’s beliefs as its priorities, and it would be interesting to see if socially conservative Taiwan adopts measures first or not. Not requiring women to change their names after marriage is probably both more progressive and defensible than the party’s rural promotion of girls (necessitated by and not very effective at countering the effects of the draconian one-child policy). Several articles by Solinger also point to foundations of a Chinese welfare state, rooted in socialist rather than democratic principles, in some regards less burdened by right-wing concerns of “moral hazard” than here in the U.S. Rule of law is another liberal concept which some hope can precede electoral democracy, and indeed I have never successfully bribed anyone in the PRC.

<sup>31</sup> As China liberalizes and develops economically, it can be expected to face more problems like immigration policy and the morally ambiguous distinctions between refugees and economic migrants. Economic development in Xinjiang and continued harsh authoritarian rule in Central Asian countries presumably have both push and pull effects on Uyghurs and others in the region.

there is sometimes deliberate vagueness in official statements as to whether this or the more familiar, universal kind is being referred to.<sup>32</sup>

How should an outside observer evaluate the extent to which a country as large and diverse as the PRC has attained this idealized regime type, which may be little more than propaganda? If Mao's "New" may be a conglomeration of various, but all "distinctly Chinese" theories, the common element may be said to be democracy by means other than national elections.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to argue that making the regime more responsive to the expressed demands of the people does not create a quasi-democratic feeling among citizens whose opinions on policy matters are increasingly consulted. Whether views can be expressed freely and whether the party actually takes them into account, two dubious propositions loudly proclaimed by those who see Hu and Wen as democratizers, are crucial components of any non-electoral democratic pretenses.<sup>34</sup>

Even if consultation meetings and local elections are not very effective democratic institutions, perhaps the most scholarly excitement of the past decade has centered on the potential of intra-party (or inner party in the CCP parlance) democracy. This is an alternative to national elections which the West largely sees as a transitional stage, demarcating the kind of split which would be necessary if not sufficient for an opposition to form. Based explicitly on elections within the CCP, there does not seem to be any grand, cultural opposition to the primary democratic decision-making mechanism in this context.<sup>35</sup> Bo Zhiyue's closing chapter is replete with examples of how this Chinese innovation has

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<sup>32</sup> Unless Mao's "New Democracy" and its conceptual cousin (or identical twin), "socialist democracy", both describe the state of the PRC from its founding to the present, it should be considered that official references to democracy—unless accompanied by modifiers "Western" or "bourgeois" for purposes of denigration—may be short-hand for these ideologically approved versions. If the official definitions are accepted by the population, and most frequent visitors to the PRC know some who do, the rhetorical divide serves to address the desires of both domestic and Western audiences who can project their own definitions onto the term. In both cases, "democracy is a good thing" in the words of Yu Keping, but the more familiar form may only be praised in the most cautious, non-committal manner, as Yu's essay and those espousing "universalist" values do. Chapters in Li's edited volume treat this intentionally vague definitional issue in considerable detail, with somewhat different conclusions.

<sup>33</sup> In other words, it rejects the procedural requirements central to most "minimalist" definitions, such as Schumpeter's widely-used, empirical threshold. Most Chinese forms also either implicitly or explicitly deny the necessity of liberal values such as tolerance and an actively participatory citizenry, favoring instead an all but empirically unverifiable popular form (revealing the true "will of the people", as opposed to the more modest liberal conceptualization which finds this impossible and focuses instead on the possibility of throwing bad officials out via elections) translated fundamentally as "rule by the people". Thus, the simple, semantic act of the CCP's recent propagandistic statements of "putting the people first" likely fortified the party's democratic credentials among the more credulous of China's domestic population, mixing traditional principles of *minben* 民本 and *minzhu* 民主, democracy itself.

<sup>34</sup> Shanruo Ning Zhang (sorry if misspelled...also, can't find the handout from her recent talk at UCI) suggested in Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>'s colloquium that there are opportunities to challenge the Party in local and provincial consultative meetings, thought the audience is exclusive, the expectation is either to confirm or support all policies, firm opposition has yet to be observed, and it's not altogether clear why the party holds such meetings or whether they can expand throughout the country or at higher levels.

<sup>35</sup> Or, surprisingly, any problem among the supposedly low-*suzhi* 素质 rural residents already practicing something recognizable in the West as "semi-free" electoral democracy for decades. When middle class Chinese express fears about not being "ready" for democracy at the national level, they probably are referring to this massive, poor majority's likely redistributive demands, and are no doubt aware of the contradictory irony.

worked in practice, though like Yu Keping’s pieces from “within the matrix”, the positive light may be shined too brightly.

The topic of Chinese democratization is treated in great detail in countless other sources, so this essay finds no objections to ending the preceding, cursory analysis here. As the reader no doubt grows weary of speculation and conjectures about conceptualization and directional signals which may or may not exist or be well interpreted, the next and final section is far more empirical.

**Scholars and labels.** A survey of recent scholarly literature suggests that the tenure of Hu and Wen—a full ten years—is categorically inconclusive. This section will aggregate the various labels which have been applied, highlight particularly unique ones, and argue that most scholars are hesitant to adhere to a single one. It begins by backing up the claim that all scholars must perform an act of regime categorization at some point, aggregated in the chart below.

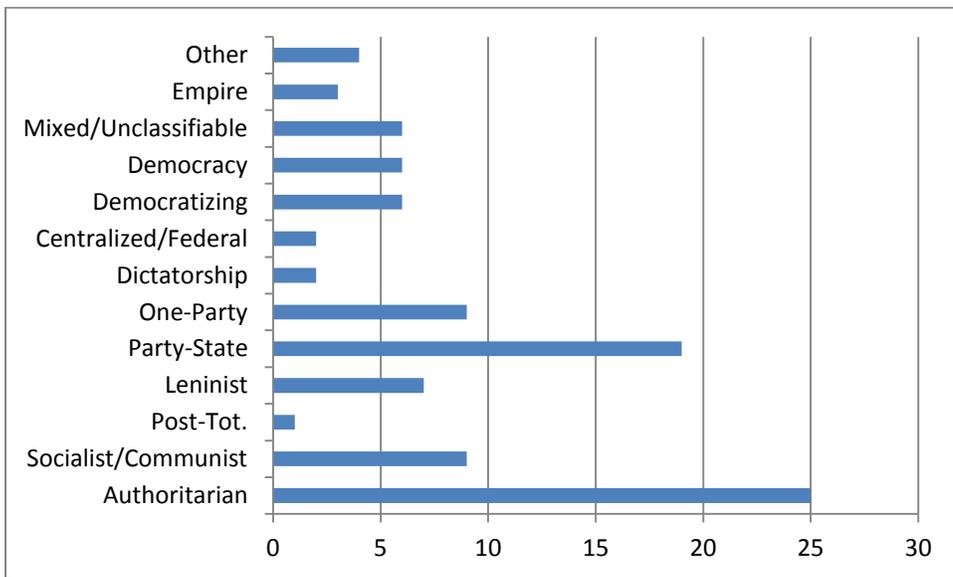


FIGURE 2: How scholars classify the

contemporary PRC regime in books, chapters, articles since 2000 (mostly since 2005). Categories are not mutually exclusive, and note again that accusations of “empire” would rather disqualify the PRC from statehood and, thereby, regime applicability. Total observations: 99. The full database of observations can be found in the APPENDIX.

The methodology of the scholarly sampling above could be generously described as “data mining”, as most of the sources were not specifically concerned with categorizing the current regime. Those that did so tended to favor a designation as a Leninist party-state, a plurality of the sources overall if “Leninist”, “Party-state”, and “One-party” tallies are combined, and thus the weighted presumption in the Leninist Party-state section that this label was the best fit. For the other articles, regime type was more likely mentioned in passing, either in the introduction or conclusion, so some additional caution should be exercised before taking this small sample as definitive.

What explains the far greater usage of authoritarianism than the single text which employs a lens of post-totalitarianism, despite the latter's probably greater validity? There is likely a problem of resonance—totalitarianism is simply less salient today than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of high ideologies, and therefore the distinction of moving past that stage may taken for granted. Also, it should be noted that the authoritarian tally “benefits” from aggregating all the novel, qualified forms scholars use. “Developmental”, “responsive”, “evolved or adaptive”, and “fragmented” are prominent among them, each emphasizing a different aspect of how the regime legitimizes itself, how it relates with the population, adapts to new challenges, and generally functions and forms policy. In short, many of the authoritarian permutations don't contradict a post-totalitarian label at all, would probably fit right in, but authors may simply not have found the label descriptive enough.<sup>36</sup> Finally, authors with only a regime dichotomy in mind may default to authoritarianism if observed democratic institutions are lacking or not up to standard.

The list of regime types this essay has considered is by no means exhaustive. Evidently the CCP has not yet done enough for some to disqualify the PRC as a communist regime, but calling it such without any qualifiers is frankly audacious to anyone who has spent more than a few days there in the past decade. A subtype such as post-communist is problematic, however, because it suggests that communism is finished, whereas it rears its modernist head in society in more ways than can be counted: ethnicity, religion, architecture, and even sports remain indelibly framed by dialectic concepts. Benevolent or developmental dictatorship are subject to both normative biases and the problems mentioned in the section on dictatorship.

There is also a more interesting conceptual possibility that would give the PRC both the unique status and democratic legitimacy it seeks. The belief that China is “on the right track”, held by an overwhelming majority of the country<sup>37</sup>, might render the PRC the oxymoronic distinction of a “non-electoral democracy”—or at least a real approximation of Mao's “New” democracy, with a cognate in the relationship between the liberal democratic ideal and Dahl's observed polyarchies. If economic development is the top goal of the people, as many claim in “developmental states”, few regimes could stake a stronger claim to being democratic—as long as the dissident portion of the population remains too small to form a “loyal opposition” worthy of the CCP's recognition as legitimate.

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<sup>36</sup> It is terribly unwieldy to type or find synonyms for post-totalitarianism, especially if trying to use the concept multiple times in the same paragraph!

<sup>37</sup> I forget if this was a World Bank or World Values Survey result, but data shows the Chinese nation to be among the world's most optimistic, with something like 89% expressing “right-trackedness” in 2011 (or '09 or '10...don't have internet access to get a proper citation at the moment). Certainly some of this must translate directly into support for the regime.

**Conclusion.** What have we gained from this taxonomic exercise? Presumably the reader was not expecting either a conclusive answer to the PRC regime question or, even less, an exhortation that a single label be adopted consistently. While we can't blame a country for failing to conform to a theoretical compartment, criticism is due to our field of political science for being unable to concur coherently on the PRC's most basic, objective features for over a decade. As a prescription, especially if contradictory reforms continue China's transition in no obviously democratic direction (with other developing countries explicitly following the CCP's successful lead), we may soon need to use this highly important case not only to build theories to explain itself, but also its West- and "North"-averse imitators.<sup>38</sup> A "Beijing Consensus" has roots in both the communist past and the distinctly anti-communist East Asian developmental states of Japan and South Korea, but few scholars outside of China seem to be taking it as a serious theoretical model. And furthermore, differing definitions of democracy between East and West may make our more non-democratic focus here seem straightforward by comparison.

Unexpectedly, this essay is sorely tempted to conclude that while much analytical depth is lost in dichotomous scales, they may be the only viable way to reconcile the myriad different definitions and classifications used by scholars. In other words, without a scholarly consensus on how to categorize the current political system under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, it would be difficult to specify what would constitute an objective, empirical change in the regime. Perhaps nothing short of full implementation of "free and fair" elections at the national level could signal a change for most Western observers. Even an intermediate stage similar to the "semi-free" elections in rural, local levels of China would likely be insufficient to turn the pendulum over to the democratic side of the dichotomy<sup>39</sup>, much to the continued consternation of scholars and politicians within the PRC.

What rescues the more nuanced, less dogmatic regime continua is again their ability to capture and describe changes which resonate with the Chinese population.<sup>40</sup> In a 2006 edited volume considering the possibility of a "rule of law regime", Suisheng Zhao goes so far as to call the authoritarian versus democratic distinction "useless", with popular regimes "governing" in the Huntingtonian sense on both sides of the aisle.<sup>41</sup> In terms more persuasive to empirical positivists in the social sciences, each of the regime types examined here—not just the most popular democratic versus

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<sup>38</sup> By this is meant the distinction between the global developed "North" and developing "South".

<sup>39</sup> Rather, a quasi-, pseudo-, or competitive authoritarianist modifier would lie in store, much as Russia is treated under Putin.

<sup>40</sup> When push comes to shove, I side with those who say that the preoccupation or obsession with democracy is largely coming from the outside. That is, the vast majority of Chinese people I know (mainly students in Sichuan and Gansu) could hardly care less about democracy, are quite confused when the teacher asks them what they'd like to learn or do in class and suggests a vote be taken.

<sup>41</sup> One of the central premises in Zhao's "debates" is that rule of law is something virtually everyone in the PRC prefers, or at least finds less threatening than wholesale acceptance of Western democratic institutions. He does, nonetheless, conclude that without free elections it may not be possible to achieve even this supposedly moderate goal.

authoritarian divide—could be operationalized as a “dummy variable”, with supporters and opponents on each side. As the PRC is unlikely ever to embrace liberal, “Western democracy” wholeheartedly, there may always be some who answer in the affirmative to the question of whether the CCP regime is still communist. The onus to change this outdated perspective, while maintaining the PRC’s impressive trajectory of popular legitimacy and economic development, will soon be placed squarely on Hu and Wen’s successors in the next generation of leadership. This scholar in training hopes the transition is a smooth one, but also in a clearer direction.

APPENDIX SHOULD GO HERE, IN LANDSCAPE FORMAT.



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