Systemic Stresses and Political Choices:

China's Road to "Soft Authoritarian" Reform

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Although a dynamic market economy and a vibrant civil society have begun to emerge in China over the past two decades, the country's Leninist political institutions remain substantially unmodified. There is thus a growing disconnect between a thriving, revitalized economy and society, on the one hand, and a rigid, anachronistic system of governance, on the other. This disconnect constitutes a formidable obstacle to China's long-term developmental health and stability.

Partly due to the lack of sufficiently transparent and responsive political institutions, a number of socieo-economic stresses have been allowed to accumulate in China during the reform era, their severity masked by continuing high rates of aggregate economic growth. These include rising urban unemployment; a growing urban-rural income gap; widespread official corruption; a teetering banking system; and a looming HIV/AIDS epidemic. While the country's new leaders appear committed to dealing pro-actively with these challenges, it is by no means clear that the institutions of governance at their disposal are adequate to the tasks at hand.

The combination of rapid socio-economic change and minimal political-institutional reform highlights a central paradox confronting China's Leninist regime as it struggles to accommodate the new social forces and pressures unleashed in the process of economic reform. Charles Lindblom once observed that Leninist systems were particularly well suited to inducing social change from above; that is, they had muscular, well-developed statist "thumbs" that could exert highly concentrated pressure on society. By the same token, however, Leninist systems had weak, insensitive "fingers." That is, they had great difficulty in accurately gauging and responding to dispersed societal signals.[1] In contrast, Lindblom observed, pluralist democracies had relatively weak thumbs, rendering them incapable of generating concentrated coercive force; but they had sensitive, well-developed fingers, enabling them accurately to gauge and respond to changing environmental stimuli. In short, Leninist systems excelled in *mechanisms of force*, while market democracies excelled in *mechanisms of feedback*.

As Chinese society becomes more complex, differentiated, and information-rich, the need for enhanced sensitivity in the system's political receptors—or "input institutions"—increases greatly.[2] The market mechanism—Adam Smith's "invisible hand"—performs this function in the economic sphere, enabling producers and consumers to respond quickly and effectively to shifting market signals. But there is a growing need for equally sensitive feedback mechanisms in the political sphere. In democratic polities this function is normally performed by interest groups, a free press, public opinion, and competitive elections.

Lacking such autonomous, well-articulated input institutions, however, China's Leninist polity remains seriously insensitive and unresponsive. In effect, it suffers from being "all thumbs." The consequences of such insensitivity were well illustrated during the early stages of the SARS epidemic, when an inadequate flow of information and a lack of governmental candor combined to prevent the timely adoption of effective countermeasures.

In an effort to gain added political sensitivity without at the same time ceding political initiative to independent social or political forces, the CCP has adopted various "united front" techniques. Designed to link the party more closely with important non-party socio-economic constituencies and occupational groups through "mutual consultation and supervision," united front organs have traditionally included the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, mass organizations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the All-China Women's Federation, and the eight officially recognized "democratic parties." The problem with such organizations is that, despite their nominal commitment to mutual supervision and consultation, they are almost entirely creatures of the Communist Party. Closely controlled and supervised by party officials, such corporatist bodies are ill-suited to perform the vital, autonomous input/feedback functions needed to foster effective governance. Indeed, because of their careful cultivation, tending, and weeding by the CCP, these organizations are often cynically referred to as "flowerpots."[3]

Implicitly conceding the inability of the CCP's traditional united front bodies to incorporate and represent the interests of all sectors of China's increasingly complex, pluralistic society, Jiang Zemin lobbied hard in his final years as China's top leader to broaden the CCP's socio-economic base and thereby "keep abreast of the times." In February 2000 he stated that "Only if the party [represents] the development of China's advanced social productive forces, the forward direction for China's cultural advancement, and the … fundamental interests of China's vast population will the party always be able to maintain an invincible position."[4] This rather awkward formulation was subsequently refined and repackaged as the "theory of the three represents" (*sange daibiao*). At the 16th Party Congress the "three represents" were incoporated into the party constitution.

Perforce, the constitutional inclusion of the "three represents" reflects the CCP's growing recognition of the urgent need to strengthen its societal "fingers." But it is only a first step. For while the "three represents" arguably permits a greater diversity of interests and opinions to be incorporated *within* the party, in the absence of corresponding institutional changes this will do little to empower ordinary citizens *vis-à-vis* the party; nor will it necessarily grant a more autonomous, authentic voice to the party's rank-and-file. Because the "three represents" neither guarantees accountable, responsive governance nor ensures greater transparency in policy making and administration, the verdict on Jiang's controversial theory remains out. Much will depend on what concrete structural reforms, if any, follow from this ideological entering wedge.

Politics: The Art of the Plausible

Faced with a variety of deepening fault lines, but averse to potentially destabilizing macro-political reforms (such as multi-party elections and a constitutional separation of powers), China's new leaders would appear to have a limited range of political options at

their disposal. Politics is (or should be) the art of the possible—or at least the *plausible*. Given China's current circumstances, what political pathways are plausibly available? How can greater state sensitivity, responsiveness, accountability and transparency be engineered without threatening the very survival of the regime?

Short of a system-threatening breakdown of social order we can probably rule out a fundamental democratic breakthrough in the near future. Lingering memories of the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, and the collapse of the Soviet Union gravitate against expectations of a bold, top-down political transformation. For more than a decade, the regime's fear of instability has precluded all but the safest, most non-threatening political innovations. Even the one significant reform that appears to contradict this observation—the widespread introduction of direct village elections—was designed less to promote genuine democratic governance than to head off a brewing peasant revolt against corrupt, predatory local officials.[5] The central government's failure to authorize direct elections in China's 50,000 townships tends to confirm the suspicion that elections are intended more as a tension-relief mechanism than an instrument of genuine self-governance.[6]

Since the Tiananmen crisis, "muddling through" has been the regime's political strategy of choice. Steady, high rates of economic growth in the 1990s, underpinned by a massive influx of foreign direct investment, helped make this strategy viable, taking the edge off socio-political discontent. When problems arose that could not be ignored—farmers protesting excessive extractions; laid-off workers demanding payment of embezzled wages and pensions; outraged parents demanding investigation of an explosion that killed several primary school students—they were handled on an *ad hoc*, individual basis. So long as such incidents were localized, isolated, and unorganized they could be dealt with by a paternalistic government determined to keep the lid on social disorder. If necessary, village elections could be held to remove corrupt rural cadres; government officials could launch high-profile investigations into the causes of a school fire (or coal-mine collapse); and money could be found to pay off angry workers and pensioners.[7]

In this connection, Andrew Nathan has observed that the regime has at least partly succeeded in shoring up its fragile popular legitimacy by "encouraging individual rather than group-based inputs" and by "focusing complaints against specific local-level agencies or officials," thereby "diffusing possible aggression against the Chinese party-state."[8] Such a strategy of localized anger displacement and redirection is most effective when discontent is small in scale and widely dispersed, and when communication among aggrieved groups is difficult. What began happening in the late 1990s, however, was the *mobilization* and *aggregation* of discontent by disadvantaged groups possessing modern means of communication—cellphones, pagers, personal computers, fax machines, and the Internet. As socialized manifestations of discontent became larger in scale, their potential political danger to the regime itself became greater.

With the scope and scale of socio-economic discontent on the rise, It was hardly coincidental that Hu Jintao, in his first major act of national leadership following the 16th Party Congress, made a pilgrimage to the CCP's old revolutionary base of Xibaibo, where he reaffirmed his commitment to the party's traditional egalitarian ethos of "plain living and hard struggle." A month later, on the eve of the Chinese New Year, Hu Jintao and Premier-

designate Wen Jiabao traveled to the interior provinces of Inner Mongolia and Shanxi, respectively, where they paid "comfort visits" to hard-pressed farmers, herdsmen, and coal miners. Displaying empathy for the poor and the dispossessed, Hu and Wen sought to enhance their—and the CCP's—public image as upright and caring.[9] A similar, if belated, effort by China's top leaders to deal resolutely with the worsening SARS epidemic and assuage mounting public fear was very much in evidence during the middle stages of the epidemic in the late spring of 2003.[10]

Notwithstanding such public displays of leadership compassion and concern, China's myriad socio-economic problems are unlikely to prove amenable to *ad hoc*, paternalistic solutions. Sporadic acts of *noblesse oblige* by sympathetic state leaders certainly count for something; but they are not, ultimately, a viable substitute for sound political institutions.

Needed: A Transition to "Soft Authoritarianism"

What is most urgently needed at present is a serious elite commitment to strengthening the institutions of socio-political inclusion and interest articulation. This would involve a number of concrete steps that go well beyond the limited objectives of Jiang's "three represents" and Hu Jintao's "comfort visits." Such steps include the easing of present restrictions on unofficial religious, social, and occupational organizations; expanding the scope of political and intellectual tolerance; enhancing the autonomy of the mass media and organs of public opinion; strengthening the representative functions of people's congresses; and, in general, relaxing party control on governmental administration. Such "soft authoritarian" reforms would not, in and of themselves, ensure governmental transparency, accountability, or the rule of law; still less would they solve the country's economic problems. But they would, at a minimum, help to strengthen China's congenitally weak input institutions and thereby revitalize its frail, insensitive socio-political "fingers."[11]

Preliminary movement in the direction of soft authoritarianism first occurred in the late 1980s, under Zhao Ziyang. In his political report to the13th Party Congress in 1987, Zhao outlined a program of partial political reform that included the following major components: removal of the Communist Party from state administration; delegation of governmental authority and responsibility to lower levels; reform of the personnel system to minimize political patronage; enhancement of the supervisory authority of representative bodies and mass organizations; and strengthening of the rule of law. Perhaps the most radical proposal of all, however, was Zhao's call for the party-state to recognize the legitimacy of diverse interest groups—the first step toward authentic political pluralism: "Different groups of people may have different interests and views," he said; "they too need opportunities for the exchange of ideas." Zhao further affirmed that "Socialist society is not a monolith … special interests should not be overlooked. Conflicting interests should be reconciled."[12]

If adopted, Zhao's reforms would have taken the first significant step toward easing the state-society disconnect in China. However, Zhao's proposals were stillborn, stopped in their tracks by the Tiananmen crackdown. Zhao himself was removed from his leadership post for "splitting the party." Thereafter, fear of endemic instability and chaos, reinforced by the sudden, startling disintegration of the Soviet Union, prevented China's third-generation leaders from renewing Zhao's call for enhanced political pluralism and feedback. To date,

neither Zhao nor his 1987 proposals have been rehabilitated.

While fear of chaos and instability has routinely been invoked as the primary reason for postponing serious political reform, there is an even more pressing problem facing China's fourth-generation leaders: the prospect of the continuing erosion of state authority and popular legitimacy. Political cynicism and alienation run high throughout Chinese society. The regime's Marxist-Leninist philosophical underpinnings have been diluted virtually beyond recognition by 25 years of market reform and rationalization; and the party is no longer able to offer an inspiring vision of China's future. Increasingly, the party is seen by many groups and individuals in society as being largely irrelevant in their daily lives—an annoyance to be avoided where possible and endured when necessary. Indicative of growing popular indifference to the party's leaders and policies, ordinary Chinese often laugh and roll their eyes upward when asked about Jiang Zemin's "theory of the three represents." As a measure of institutional alienation, a recent poll commissioned by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences revealed that 80 percent of respondents would prefer to directly elect their government officials, if given the choice.[13]

Under such circumstances, and given the improbability of a sudden, radical democratic transformation from above (which might well undermine the foundations of Communist Party rule in China), what can be done? Is there a middle ground that would enable the regime's instittutional "fingers" to gain strength and autonomy without at the same time threatening the very survival ot the system itself?

Although the reform measures outlined by Zhao Ziyang in 1987 were neither fully elaborated nor wholly democratic in nature, they nonetheless identified a plausible pathway toward narrowing the gap between an overbearing state and a congenitally enfeebled society. In this respect, they can be seen to constitute important first steps in China's transition to soft authoritarian political modernity.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to soft authoritarian reform is the formidable factor of *political inertia*. Other things being equal, and short of a large-scale systemic crisis, China's fourth generation leaders may well opt—as did their third-generation predecessors—to take the path of least resistance, choosing to "muddle through" with only modest, incremental political tinkering and minimal structural adjustment. Perforce, muddling through is the default strategy preferred by most entrenched political elites, most of the time. But China's leaders may not have this luxury for much longer. Given a deepening of the socio-economic and political-institutional fault lines discussed above, time may no longer be on their side. Although the country's extraordinary record of near double-digit economic growth since the Tiananmen crackdown has enabled the regime to weather the transitional shocks of marketization and "opening up" without undergoing serious, systemic political upheaval, the good times may not last. Stopgap measures such as controlled village elections, leaders' comfort visits, ubiquitous rural "letters-and-visits stations" (*xinfangju*), and the 1989 Administrative Litigation Law (which permits individual citizens, but not groups, to sue government agencies), are arguably steps in the right direction insofar as they permit some political stress reduction.[14] But they are only first steps, a "hard authoritarian" regime's minimal concession to the need for more robust input/feedback institutions.

So long as the economy continues to grow, China's leaders may be able to further delay the onset of necessary institutional reforms. But there are two big drawbacks to such a

strategy: first, it makes the regime a captive hostage to global (and local) economic forces that it cannot readily control; and second, it compounds the political risks posed by an increasingly restive, cynical population. Far better, it can be argued, pro-actively to initiate institutional reforms while the economy remains relatively robust, than to wait until the system is in crisis and "regime failure" becomes a real (rather than merely a hypothetical) possibility. The need for more sensitive socio-political "fingers" has never been greater in China. The Leninist "thumb" needs to relax its grip while it still commands sufficient public authority to do so.

1　Charles Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

2　On the importance of input institutions in China's political modernization, see Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14: 1 (January 2003), pp. 13−16.

3　On the nature and political support functions of China's united front organizations, see Lyman Van Slyke, *Enemies and Friends; the United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 208−253. On the inability of state-sponsored corporatist bodies to protect and promote the interests of their members, see Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "China, Corporatism, and the East Asia Model," *The China Journal* 33 (January 1995), pp. 29−53.

4　Quoted in Yu Yunyao, "Fully Strengthen Party Building in the New Era In Accordance With the Requirements of the 'Three Represents.'" Translated in FBIS-CPP20010824000143 (August 24, 2001).

5　See Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," in Goldman and MacFarquhar, *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, pp. 129−144.

6　On the checkered history of township elections see Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China," *The China Quarterly 171* (September 2002), pp. 704−723.

7　According to a recent report by researchers at the CASS Institute of Sociology, the central government made one-off, *ad hoc* transfer payments totaling US $3.1 billion to aggrieved urban workers in 1999, up almost 65% from the 1998 level. (Tang, "The New Situation of Poverty and Anti-Poverty.")

8　Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," p. 15.

9　John Gittings, "Mind the Gap," *The Guardian* (Online), January 21, 2003, http://www.guardian.co.uk/ elsewhere/country/story/0,7792,879323,00.html; also Erik Eckholm, "China's New Leader Works to Set Himself Apart," *New York Times*, January 12, 2003.

10　See "China Feels Side Effects from SARS," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2003, p. A1.

11　The term "soft authoritarianism" was originally coined with reference to the combination of paternalistic, executive-dominated government and pluralistic socio-political inclusion displayed by Southeast Asia's "little dragons." Later it was adapted by Minxin Pei and others to describe a possible political trajectory for post-reform China. See Pei, "China's Evolution Toward Soft-Authoritarianism," in Barrett McCormick, ed., *What If China Does Not Democratize* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 74−98.

12　Traditionally, Leninist systems have asserted as a matter of principle the complete identity of public and private interests, denying the very possibility of any legitimate discrepancy between the two. During the Cultural Revolution the hegemonic dominance of the public interest reached its apotheosis with Mao Zedong's injunction to "destroy the self, promote the public" (*posi, ligong*). Zhao Ziyang's proposals for enhanced political pluralism and reform are analyzed in Baum, *Burying Mao*, pp. 220−222.

13　For an analysis of recent trends in Chinese public opinion, see Joseph Fewsmith, "China's Domestic Agenda: Social Pressures and Public Opinion." *China Leadership Monitor* 6 (Spring 2003). http://www. chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20032/jf.html.

14　On the efficacy of "letters-and-visits stations" in dealing with rural grievances, see Bernstein and Lu, *Taxation without Represention*. On the implementation of the Administrative Litigation Law, see Minxin Pei, "Citizens vs. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China," *The China Quarterly* 152 (December 1997), pp. 832−862.