

Is the Chinese Communist Regime Legitimate?

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No question is more fundamental to a political regime's stability and survival than that of popular legitimacy: In the eyes of its people, does the regime in power have a "right to rule"? Even if citizens may dislike the particular policies or personnel of the ruling regime, do they nonetheless feel morally obliged to acquiesce to its authority? The connection to regime durability is obvious; only the most coercive of police states can endure for long without a general acceptance of regime legitimacy on the part of the populace.

Writing over a century ago, the historical sociologist Max Weber identified three basic sources of regime legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. In the *traditional* type, people obey the state's dictates simply because it is customary to do so. Weber pointed to imperial China as an archetypical example. The Revolution of 1911, which replaced China's two-thousand-year-old imperial system with a new republican form of government, shattered its traditional legitimacy. In the *charismatic* type of regime legitimacy, popular obedience derives from devotion to the supreme leader. Many scholars have characterized Mao's China as a classic case of charismatic rule. As the supreme leader of a Communist Revolution that restored Chinese sovereignty, Mao Zedong's personal aura shone brighter than that of any of his contemporaries or successors. His death in 1976 closed the chapter on charismatic legitimacy. In the *rational-legal* type of legitimacy, which sustains modern democracies, impersonal laws and bureaucratic administrative procedures are the basis for citizens' compliance. Few observers, however, would suggest that at any point in China's long history of authoritarianism has rational-legal legitimacy prevailed; today, as in the past, rule of man consistently trumps rule of law.

To be sure, there have been efforts in the post-Mao period to generate rational-legal legitimacy through various institutional reforms: convening regular party and government congresses, clarifying respective party and government responsibilities, constructing a collective leadership with separate portfolios for members of the Politburo Standing Committee, imposing mandatory retirement ages and term limits on party and government officials, and so on. But the movement toward institutionalization appears to have reversed course in recent years. Under Xi Jinping, power has been recentralized in the paramount leader, the party's unquestioned supremacy over government has been reasserted, and norms surrounding age and term limits are in danger of being subverted at the upcoming 19th Party Congress.

If none of Weber's three classic types of legitimacy applies to contemporary China, how then do we explain the paradox that – more than forty years after Mao's death and twenty-five years after the fall of Communism across Central Europe – a Communist regime remains firmly in place in Beijing? Coercion is surely part of the explanation for the regime's survival, but not the whole story. For one thing, internal security forces operate less intrusively and ruthlessly in China than was true under some previous Communist regimes (consider the East German Stasi, for example).

For another, numerous public opinion surveys conducted by a wide variety of pollsters agree that popular support for the Chinese Communist regime remains surprisingly strong. In his *Populist Authoritarianism*, political scientist Wenfang Tang finds that “[w]hen political support was measured in different ways, including confidence in the key political institutions, national identity, satisfaction with government performance, support for one’s own political system, or support for incumbent leaders, Chinese respondents consistently demonstrated one of the highest levels among the countries and regions where survey data were available . . . the overall level of political support in China is significantly higher than in many liberal democracies” (159).

Support is not the same thing as legitimacy, of course. Approval of one’s political leaders and their programs does not necessarily mean that one accords the regime a moral right to rule. Struggling to explain the paradox of regime sustainability in contemporary China, several scholars, including Dingxin Zhao and Yuchao Zhu, have suggested that the PRC survives only by virtue of an instrumental “performance legitimacy” derived from the impressive economic growth of the post-Mao period and China’s attendant ascent in international influence. Popular support that is generated simply by favorable governance outcomes does not, however, qualify as “legitimacy” in Weber’s terms. Weber’s famous typology was motivated by the deeper question of why some regimes, even in the face of *unfavorable* performance, continue to enjoy popular validation. The question is of clear relevance to contemporary China, where a slowing economy and deteriorating international environment threaten to erode the stunning accomplishments of recent decades. Will dwindling political support under conditions of adversity spell the downfall of the regime, as proponents of a “performance legitimacy” explanation predict, or does the Chinese Communist regime command a level of popular legitimacy that may allow it to withstand the substantial domestic and global challenges looming on the near horizon?

Due to restrictions on freedom of expression, it is impossible to know for certain whether an authoritarian regime is deemed legitimate in the eyes of its people. Yet it is clear that the question of regime legitimacy not only preoccupies those who study China; it concerns those who rule China as well. Wang Qishan, the anti-corruption czar and chief lieutenant of President Xi Jinping, broached the subject himself during a meeting with foreign dignitaries in the fall of 2015. Wang did not cite tradition, charisma, or rational-legal authority, nor did he mention regime performance, in offering his defense of CCP legitimacy. Rather, Wang pointed to history. As he framed it, “The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party has its source in history, and rests on the will and choice of the people.” [中国共产党的合法性源自于历史，是人心向背决定的，是人民的选择。]

The idea of a powerful and popular “historical legitimacy” as an explanation for CCP authority is intriguing. But it is also inherently ambiguous. In a country that boasts some 5,000 years of history, the 95-year-old CCP can lay personal claim to but a miniscule portion of China’s fabled past. To be sure, the last century has seen momentous change (for better and for worse), much of which can be attributed to CCP initiative. The Communist Revolution (1921–49) was itself an extraordinary feat, as a ragtag peasant army emerged victorious following battles against superior Japanese and Nationalist military might. In just the first few years after its revolutionary rise to power, the CCP managed moreover to expel “foreign imperialism” (if only to replace it for a time with “Soviet revisionism”), implement massive (albeit bloody) land reform, collectivize and nationalize agriculture and industry, and deliver basic medical care and

education to its people. These historic achievements probably did generate widespread acceptance for the CCP and its paramount leader, Mao Zedong. However, the record for the rest of Mao's reign surely stirs less positive memories. The Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 silenced many of China's most gifted intellectuals. The Great Leap Forward of 1958-61 delivered the worst famine in human history, causing tens of millions of deaths. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 produced violent factional strife, stagnant incomes, and "ten lost years" in higher education and economic innovation. Indeed, the current leadership's mantra of "stability maintenance" – which calls for massive state investment in surveillance and security – is rationalized as a necessary measure to prevent a recurrence of the turmoil that marred earlier periods of PRC history.

The Chinese Communist Party's effort to wrap itself in the mantle of historical legitimacy thus raises some thorny issues. Exactly *which* episodes in China's complex history should be credited with bestowing an unassailable "right to rule" on the CCP? And just how durable is such legitimacy, especially when objective inquiry may contradict the official narrative of events on which the regime's legitimacy is purportedly based?

The PRC hopes to finesse these questions by exerting tight Party control over the interpretation of Chinese history and politics. As reported by multiple news outlets, in May 2016, President Xi Jinping presided over a national symposium on philosophy and social science at which he called for developing new analytical approaches that would be imbued with "Chinese characteristics" suited to the country's "socialist practices." Xi stressed that Communist Party leadership was essential in this urgent theory-building exercise. He proposed that efforts be made to "care for, foster and make full use of" the many intellectuals working in the fields of philosophy and social science so as to ensure that they would be "advocates of advanced thinking, trailblazers of academic research, guides of social ethos, and *staunch supporters of Party governance*."

Xi Jinping is no doubt correct to believe that cultivating a loyal intelligentsia willing to provide a credible justification for continued Communist Party rule is crucial to its long-term survival. As Peter Bol's essay in this volume explains, Chinese rulers have for centuries depended on intellectuals to help construct political legitimacy, an assignment that often involved the rewriting of history. But today this is by no means an easy order. If Chinese history is to stand as the ultimate arbiter of regime legitimacy, then what should we make of the inconvenient reality that the political institutions and ideology of the PRC were imported almost wholesale from the Soviet Union and bear very little resemblance to those of pre-revolutionary China? For a regime struggling to present itself as the custodian of five millennia of "glorious" Chinese history, this is a problem. Even if the claim to legitimacy were to rest solely on the CCP's achievement of having "restored" China's territorial integrity and national sovereignty with the founding of the PRC in 1949, the contention is problematic. Throughout much of its history, China was physically divided, its imagined coherence residing primarily in cultural, rather than political, unity. As historian Peter Perdue points out, ironically, the full extent of the geographical expanse that the contemporary PRC claims as its historical birthright was acquired through conquest only in the 18th century when the imperial throne was occupied by a foreign Manchu dynasty.

The CCP may still enjoy a reservoir of legitimacy amassed during and after its revolutionary rise to power, but even the deepest reservoir will eventually evaporate unless regularly replenished. The unfulfilled promises of the Communist revolution remain to be fully researched, let alone realized. The CCP has proclaimed a moratorium on examinations of its own historical mistakes, condemning such discussion as one of “seven speak-nots,” public mention of which invites swift reprisals.

Efforts to anchor regime legitimacy in a distorted rewriting of the historical record are unlikely to withstand critical challenge in the long run. A sturdier scaffold on which to construct a moral rationale for CCP rule might be an earnest attempt to implement the ideals of social justice that helped inspire the Communist revolution in the first place. This calls for more than an anti-corruption campaign directed at official malfeasance; it demands dramatic measures to shrink substantially the huge income gap between rich and poor that has accompanied the post-Mao economic reforms. Such an approach could draw support from the ancient Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven, whereby a ruler’s popular legitimacy was based on a concern for social welfare.

If the Chinese Communist regime continues to command some vestige of historical legitimacy, it is in danger of being depleted by current governance practices. There is, however, no surefire signal of an authoritarian regime’s imminent loss of legitimacy; the only definitive proof lies in its demise.