

EPILOGUE

China's (R)evolutionary Governance and the COVID-19 Crisis

ELIZABETH J. PERRY

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency of an informed inquiry into Chinese governance practices. Although it is too soon to reach a definitive conclusion on China's handling of the crisis, initial contradictory assessments indicate the high stakes—political and academic—riding on the issue. Detractors chastise the PRC for a lack of government transparency and accountability that allowed a local contagion to escalate into a global pandemic (Jaros 2020). Defenders commend the government for imposing the largest and longest quarantine lockdown in history, a show of strength that slowed the spread of the virus and bought valuable time for the rest of the world (Joseph and Theilking 2020). These competing portraits are both grounded in fact, but they neglect key elements of China's authoritarian governance.

As the illuminating chapters in this volume make clear, a complete account of governance in the People's Republic must include a crucial role for society. This insight is in line with recent comparative theory, prompted by an awareness that policy formulation and implementation often occur outside the formal chain of government institutions. The *Handbook on Theories of Governance* defines governance as “the interactive processes through which society and the economy are steered toward collectively negotiated objectives” (Ansell and Torfing 2016, 4). The emphasis on state–society interaction may seem obvious enough in the case of democracies, where the roles of civil society and civic engagement in “making democracy work” have been recognized for some time (Putnam 1993). As

—-1
—0
—+1

this volume points out, societal participation and pressure are also central to governance practices in authoritarian systems such as China. In the case of COVID-19, information suppression by authorities in Wuhan and Beijing would probably never have come to light without the courageous revelations of Dr. Li Wenliang and his followers on social media. At the same time, the impressive lockdown of an entire metropolis (and the surrounding province) could not have been accomplished without the cooperation of millions of ordinary citizens. In other words, Chinese society plays a major part in subverting and sustaining the state's authoritarian governance.

Another contribution of this volume is its insistence that neither state nor society remains constant or consistent in its objectives or operations. Attitudes and actions by citizens and officials alike are subject to dramatic change in reaction to each other as well as in response to new circumstances. A Chinese public that was initially angered by the state's cover-up attempts and alienated by its heavy-handed quarantine restrictions could turn sympathetic and supportive once the strong-arm approach seemed to be working to control the epidemic. The shift in domestic public opinion was helped by the swiftly moving international scene, as Western populations from Italy to the United States succumbed to the deadly virus. Increased citizen cooperation in turn allowed the Chinese state to relax some of its more draconian measures in favor of greater reliance on voluntary compliance. A crisis that had once looked like China's "Chernobyl moment" now seemed as likely to contribute to regime legitimacy as to regime collapse (Rithmire and Han 2020).

Terrible though it is, the challenge that COVID-19 has posed to all countries—authoritarian and democratic alike—offers an unusually illuminating natural experiment for investigating the sources of effective governance. Standard political science explanations focused on regime type offer limited insight for this critical investigation (Duara and Perry 2018). Although some of the most impressive national responses have come from democracies (e.g., New Zealand, Germany, South Korea, and Taiwan), the world's flagship democracies—the United States and the United Kingdom—have fallen tragically short. Among authoritarian regimes, the record is decidedly mixed. Vietnam seems to have done a remarkable job of containing the virus, whereas Russia presents a much bleaker picture—although the final prognosis for any individual country remains to be

-1—
0—
+1—

seen. Future waves of contagion loom on the horizon, and the long-term impact on gross domestic product and unemployment will become evident over time. But indications are that regime type provides minimal leverage in accounting for the variation in epidemiological and economic outcomes. As noted in the introductory chapter, numerous adjectives have been coined to qualify the nature of authoritarianism and democracy because of the bluntness of these dichotomous concepts.

More revealing than regime type as an explanation for varying responses to COVID-19 is a factor that has fallen out of favor among political scientists in recent decades: political leadership, a key variable in the perception and execution of state strategies. Countries whose national leaders managed to convey a consistently reassuring sense of resolution, compassion, and need for public cooperation in the face of crisis fared better than those whose leaders withdrew, vacillated, or downplayed the seriousness of the emergency. Leaders who prioritized the advice of public health experts inside and outside of the government performed better than those who privileged political or economic calculations. Gender may have helped shape such differences in leadership style, with countries led by women—Angela Merkel in Germany, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, and Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan—experiencing unusually positive outcomes. Countries led by “macho” populists hostile to scientific authority—Donald Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil—delivered dismal results.

In China, Xi Jinping’s initial reaction did not inspire confidence. As public anxiety mounted in the wake of the Wuhan outbreak, President Xi remained conspicuously quiet, deputizing Premier Li Keqiang to take responsibility for the crisis response. When popular dismay at Xi’s absence exploded on social media, he obviously realized that a more visible and forceful presence would be required. Referencing the legacy of the Chinese Communist Revolution, Xi proclaimed a “people’s war” against the virus in which he assumed the prominent role of commander. Once the situation on the ground was under control, Xi made a well-publicized inspection tour to the “front line of battle” to offer personal condolences to the people of Wuhan. The radical makeover of leadership style—from reticent onlooker to revolutionary battle commander—was apparently welcomed by many citizens willing to forgive initial missteps in exchange

—-1
—0
—+1

for clear and forceful top-down direction (Huang 2020). In the language of this volume's analytical framework, an initially "hard" state strategy of denial followed by nearly total lockdown gradually softened, encouraging society to become more accommodating in return. This dynamic of (reflexive) state repression yielding to episodes of engagement with society is illustrated in preceding chapters in the cases of the "rights defense" (*weiquan* 维权) movement (chapter 5), HIV/AIDS governance (chapter 6), anti-incineration protests (chapter 7), women and LGBT rights activists (chapter 11), and legitimization of Mazu belief (chapter 12). At the central or local levels, political leadership was pivotal for responding to societal demands.

Attention to leadership, while undertheorized in the political science literature, is a well-recognized feature of China's authoritarian governance. To that end, the Central Organization Department of the Communist Party has developed detailed metrics and procedures for annual performance reviews of cadres at all levels (Ang 2016, 105–25; Edin 2003). Officials under consideration for transfer or promotion are subject to more comprehensive evaluations that include annual performance results and an assessment of underlying leadership style, gleaned from interviews with colleagues, public opinion polls, and even psychological tests (Jiang and Luo 2019). Latent keyword analysis of internal leadership evaluations has identified two distinct yet complementary styles—which one could characterize as "hard" and "soft"—among those selected for top party posts. On one hand is "an assertive, autocratic style that focuses on centralized decision-making and efficient execution"; and on the other hand is "a collegial, democratic style that respects dissent and fosters intra-elite collaboration" (Jiang and Luo 2019, 2). In 2007, when Xi Jinping was appointed Party Secretary of Shanghai, his work style was deemed to be "pragmatic, cautious, low-key and collegial," traits that would help him rise to the pinnacle of the Party hierarchy (Jiang and Luo 2019, 12). Once in command as General Secretary, Xi showed himself capable of pivoting to a more muscular, dictatorial approach when the situation seemed to demand it.

In using martial rhetoric drawn from the Chinese revolution, Xi's belated "hard" line signaled that henceforth the fight against COVID-19 would be conducted as a "mass campaign" (*qunzhong yundong* 群众运动)

-1—
0—
+1—

in the Maoist tradition of governance (Rithmire and Han 2020). The mass campaigns for which Mao's China was famed—stretching from Land Reform and Thought Reform through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—had their historical origins in the Chinese Communist Revolution that predated the founding of the People's Republic (Bennett 1976; Cell 1977; Kelkar 1978). Over the ensuing decades, this revolutionary mode of governance was repurposed to serve a wide range of developmental and disciplinary goals. Although campaigns could be credited with impressive achievements in areas such as water conservancy, mass literacy, and public health, they also incurred substantial costs in terms of quality, legality, and sustainability (Oksenberg 1973).

The inherently coercive and disruptive nature of mass campaigns led Deng Xiaoping to declare an end to them soon after Mao's death; in fact, however, campaign-style governance (in a somewhat modified form) remained a distinguishing feature of policy implementation in the PRC (Perry 2011). In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, the one-child policy was implemented in campaign fashion (White 2006). In the 2000s, the New Socialist Countryside continued the pattern (Looney 2020, 117–54). More recently, Xi Jinping's signature initiatives—anticorruption and precision poverty alleviation—have also been conducted as state-mobilized campaigns, complete with work teams and inspection teams dispatched by higher levels of party and government to the grassroots to ignite mass activism and enlist mass supervision. Campaigns targeting “evil cults” and “undesirable religion” (including Christianity) followed similar suit in various localities, as discussed in chapter 13.

In framing the response to COVID-19 as a “people's war,” Xi perpetuates a familiar pattern of public health campaigns that can be traced back to the earliest years of the People's Republic (Huang 2013, chap. 2). In 1952, at the height of the Korean War, China launched the first in what became a continuing series of so-called Patriotic Health Campaigns (*ai-guo weisheng yundong* 爱国卫生运动). Conducted as battles to immunize the body politic against disease, these mass campaigns were generated by international and internal concerns. In the 1952 campaign, nearly five million Chinese were inoculated with antiplague vaccine within two weeks in response to what the government claimed were strange insects being dropped over Chinese territory by US warplanes (Endicott 1998). Soon

—1
—0
—+1

the campaign expanded into a comprehensive public health effort that mobilized ordinary citizens to improve personal hygiene, eliminate rodents and other pests, and sanitize community facilities (Rogaski 2002). In the city of Nanjing, for example, the 1952 mass movement was carried out by a combination of youth health shock brigades (*qingnian weisheng tujidui* 青年卫生突击队) organized by factories; mosquito and housefly catching teams (*buwenbuyingdui* 捕蚊捕蝇队) dispatched by neighborhoods; and disease prevention teams (*fangyidui* 防疫队) from hospitals (Nanjing Bureau of Public Health 1991). In subsequent years, Patriotic Health Campaigns occurred frequently in response to chronic and critical public health challenges. In spring 1989, the State Council designated April as “Patriotic Health Month.” For more than thirty years since, every April has seen the unfolding of a large-scale state-sponsored mass effort to improve national health and hygiene. This annual event provides a mundane mobilization infrastructure that can be readily activated and expanded at moments of crisis.

In May 2003, the SARS epidemic prompted the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao regime to declare all-out “people’s war” on the SARS virus as an extension of the previous month’s Patriotic Health Campaign. As Patricia Thornton observes, China’s response to SARS replicated a Maoist pattern of revolutionary campaign governance that worked to centralize political power while targeting certain elements of society for heightened surveillance and control. “Campaign-style grassroots mobilization combined with increased application of coercive measures against target populations defined the ‘people’s war against SARS’ in a manner that the Great Helmsman himself would have found familiar” (Thornton 2009, 48). In Mao’s day, the designated victims of mass campaigns had been “class enemies,” such as landlords, capitalists, and “rightists,” but in the people’s wars against SARS and COVID-19, the targets have included not only the disease but also those blamed for its transmission. The harsh treatment experienced in 2020 by the citizens of Wuhan, and the even harsher treatment suffered by those of African ancestry living in Guangzhou, are symptomatic of the iron-fisted mechanisms that remain integral to this revolutionary mode of governance. Despite the introduction of cutting-edge technologies (e.g., contact tracing by QR codes on cell phones) that were beyond imagination in Mao’s day, the revolutionary roots of Xi’s people’s war on COVID-19 remain clearly visible.

-1—
0—
+1—

As Kellee Tsai notes in her comprehensive introduction to this volume, analysts of politics in post-Mao China have spawned a vibrant cottage industry of “authoritarianism with adjectives.” Seeking to take account of the bewildering complexity and dynamism of state–society relations in the era of “reform and opening,” scholars have turned to models of evolution and coevolution to emphasize that governance in contemporary China, in Yuen Yuen Ang’s words, is composed of “many moving parts that interact with one another and change together, triggering outcomes that cannot be precisely controlled or predicted in advance” (Ang 2016, 10). Or, as Vivienne Shue and Patrician Thornton (2017, 13–14) put it, “We require a new metaphor, or frame for analysis capable of capturing incremental factors and processes . . . an interlaced modeling of the multiple directions of flow in patterns of political evolution over long periods of time.”

The chapters gathered here graphically illustrate how governance practices in contemporary China are indeed connected, contingent, cumulative, yet changeable. Moreover, the post-Mao era has been marked by the entrance of a multitude of new actors to the policy process: non-governmental organizations, investigative journalists, netizens, business lobbies, and more (Kennedy 2008; Mertha 2008; Yang 2011). But in labeling this development an *evolutionary* process, we should not lose sight of the fact that baked into the Chinese Communist Party’s DNA is its *revolutionary* heritage. No less an authority than Xi Jinping has argued forcefully against dividing the history of the PRC into Mao and post-Mao periods (MacFarquhar 2018). Enjoining his comrades never to forget the party’s original mission (*buwang chuxin, laoji shiming* 不忘初心，牢记使命), Xi repeatedly returns to the revolutionary past to legitimate current operations. To be sure, the CCP from revolutionary days to the present has shown remarkable flexibility with respect to a wide array of ever-changing challenges (Heilmann and Perry 2011). Yet this adaptability should not be taken to mean that the PRC has gradually evolved into a new, advanced species of authoritarianism that is no longer recognizable as a Leninist party-state.

Policy flux attributable to the intertwined hard and soft strategies of Chinese state and society recalls the cycle of *fang-shou* (放收) that Mao invoked in describing the shift from the “loosening” of the Hundred Flowers Movement to the “tightening” of the Anti-Rightist Campaign

—1
—0
—+1

in 1956–57 (Baum 1994, 5–12; Shambaugh 2018, 98–99). Drawing the comparison between then and now by no means denies that governance practices have changed profoundly since Mao's day. Rather, it reminds us that "evolutionary" governance in reform-era China still bears the (often painful) stigmata of its revolutionary progenitor. The influence of this complicated ancestry may not always be obvious in the quotidian state–society interactions that animate the very informative case studies in this volume. As these cases convincingly demonstrate, patterns of governance in issue areas such as home ownership, environmental pollution, labor rights, domestic violence, and religious observance have evolved over decades of sometimes contentious and sometimes cooperative collective action. Yet at moments of perceived regime crisis (the Tiananmen uprising in 1989, the SARS epidemic in 2003, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020), the PRC falls back on Mao's revolutionary playbook for strategic guidance. Whether we judge China's response to this latest crisis in a more favorable or unfavorable light, it cannot be gainsaid that the continuing hold of revolutionary modes of governance must figure in our assessment.

References

- Ang, Yuen Yuen. 2016. *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ansell, Christopher, and Jacob Torfing. ²⁰¹⁶ "Introduction." In *Handbook on Theories of Governance*, edited by Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing, 1–16. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Baum, Richard. 1994. *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, Gordon. 1976. *Yundong: Mass Campaigns in Chinese Communist Leadership*. Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California.
- Cell, Charles P. 1977. *Revolution at Work: Mobilization Campaigns in China*. New York: Academic Press.
- Duara, Prasenjit, and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds. 2018. *Beyond Regimes: China and India Compared*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Edin, Maria. 2003. "State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China." *China Quarterly* 173: 35–52.
- Endicott, Stephen Lyon. 1998. *The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets from the Early Cold War and Korea*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Heilmann, Sebastian, and Elizabeth J. Perry. 2011. "Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China." In *Mao's Invisible Hand: Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, edited by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, 1–29. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Huang, Yanzhong. 2013. *Governing Health in Contemporary China*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2020. "Xi Jinping Won the Coronavirus Crisis: How China Made the Most of the Pandemic it Unleashed." *Foreign Affairs* (May/June), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-13/xi-jinping-won-coronavirus-crisis>.
- Jaros, Kyle. 2020. "China's Early COVID-19 Missteps Have an All-Too-Mundane Explanation: How Intergovernmental Dynamics Influenced the Coronavirus Outbreak in China." *Diplomat*, April 9.
- Jiang, Junyan, and Zhaotian Luo. 2019. "Leadership Styles and Political Survival of Chinese Communist Party Elites." Available at SSRN, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3329665.
- Joseph, Andrew, and Megan Thielking. 2020. "WHO Praises China's Response to Coronavirus." *STAT*, January 29.
- Kelkar, Govind S. 1978. "The Chinese Experience of Political Campaigns and Mass Mobilization." *Social Scientist* 75: 45–57.
- Kennedy, Scott. 2008. *The Business of Lobbying in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Looney, Kristen E. 2020. *Mobilizing for Development: The Modernization of Rural East Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- MacFarquhar, Roderick. 2018. "Does Mao Still Matter?" In *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power*, edited by Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi, 26–32. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mertha, Andrew. 2008. *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Activism and Policy Change*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Nanjing Bureau of Public Health, ed. 1991. [Nanjing Patriotic Health Campaign Gazetteer] 南京爱国卫生运动志. Beijing: China Medical Science and Technology Press.
- Oksenberg, Michel, ed. 1973. *China's Developmental Experience*. New York: Praeger.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2011. "From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: 'Constructing a New Socialist Countryside.'" In *Mao's Invisible Hand: Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, edited by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, 30–61. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rithmire, Meg, and Courtney Han. 2020. *China's Management of COVID-19: People's War or Chernobyl Moment?* Harvard Business School, Case Study no. 720-035.
- Rogaski, Ruth. 2002. "Nature, Annihilation and Modernity: China's Korean War Germ-Warfare Experience Reconsidered." *Journal of Asian Studies* 61.2: 381–415.
- Shambaugh, David. 2018. *China's Future*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Shue, Vivienne, and Patricia M. Thornton. 2017. "Introduction: Beyond Implicit Dichotomies and Limited Models of Change in China." In *To Govern China: Evolving*

—1
—0
—+1

- Practices of Power*, edited by Vivienne Shue and Patricia M. Thornton, 1–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornton, Patricia M. 2009. "Crisis and Governance: SARS and the Resilience of the Chinese Body Politic." *China Journal* 61: 24–48.
- White, Tyrene. 2006. *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning in the People's Republic, 1949–2005*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Yang, Guobin. 2011. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New York: Columbia University Press.