

CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

2nd Edition

JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM

**With Contributions by
MAURA ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM**

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

and Chinese media systems are. The section, and the book, ends with some forecasts about the future and some suggestions about how, in the years to come, the people of the United States and the people of China might begin to see more clearly the big country across the Pacific from them.

4

FROM MAO TO NOW

Who was Deng Xiaoping?

Deng's first revolutionary experiences were as a student in France in the second decade of the 20th century, when he developed a lasting friendship with a fellow radical youth named Zhou Enlai (throughout much of the Mao era, the second-most-important person in China) and became known as "Dr. Mimeograph" because of his role in publicizing progressive causes. For nearly two decades at the end of his eventful life, Deng was the de facto, if not de jure, leader of the PRC. Next to Mao, no one has had as big an impact on the country.

Deng was the architect of the "Reform and Opening" policies that continue to set the course for China's post-Mao economic surge. He was the man who handled the successful negotiations with Margaret Thatcher that smoothed the way for Hong Kong's July 1, 1997, transition from a British territory to a specially administered part of the PRC. (That date was chosen because it marked the end of Britain's ninety-nine-year lease on the land just across the harbor from Hong Kong Island; the British could have tried to keep the island, which was not leased but had been ceded to them outright, but it would have been isolated and would have had difficulty obtaining basic necessities such as water and electricity.) Deng was also the first Chinese Communist leader to move

away from a personality-cult approach to leadership. Mao had denied that he wanted such a cult, but then did a great deal to help one develop, and Hua Guofeng continued the tradition. Deng cut it off.

One illustration of this is that Deng's face did not feature prominently on many posters, whereas Mao's had appeared on hundreds (some of which had print runs in the millions), and Hua Guofeng's featured prominently on many posters produced during his short time in power.¹ Similarly, while "Long Live Chairman Mao" and "Long Live Chairman Hua" were common slogans at celebratory state rituals before 1979, in Deng's time and since, the term *wansui* ("long live," literally "ten thousand years") has tended to be used only in calls for the continuation of institutions (the Communist Party), large groups (the people of the PRC), and policies (the unity of all ethnicities). In 1984, at the height of Deng's popularity, some students did hold up a banner saying "Hello Xiaoping" when he reviewed the troops on National Day, and there are some statues honoring him, including a big one in Shenzhen, a city near Hong Kong that he played a key role in transforming from a backwater into a major metropolis, when he made it one of the first "special economic zones," where elements of capitalism are allowed to take root. But, in general, he was seen even at the apex of his authority as the first among equals in an oligarchy rather than as a man who stood completely apart from all other Communist Party leaders.

Throughout the Mao era, Deng was alternately elevated to high posts and demoted in disgrace, sometimes criticized for being too moderate but at other times viewed as having a skill at managing the economy that was invaluable. He was last purged during the Cultural Revolution, when his family also suffered greatly (e.g., one of his sons was bullied to the point of falling off a roof and being crippled for life). And his last rise to prominence came during Hua Guofeng's brief, place-holding stretch as paramount leader.

From late 1978 on, Deng was clearly in charge, and he remained in charge until his death early in 1997 (living not quite long enough to see Hong Kong become part of the PRC). He, however, somewhat mystifyingly, was referred to throughout much of his time in power as simply the nation's "vice-premier" and in his final years was officially "retired," though he still exerted great influence from behind the scenes.

Who were Deng's successors?

One thing that Deng had in common with Mao was an inability to fix upon an heir apparent. As with Mao's chosen successors, those Deng singled out first rose high in the hierarchy and then fell out of favor. This happened to Hu Yaobang (1915–1989), who was elevated to the post of general secretary of the party under Deng but was then demoted to the status of a minor official in 1987 for taking too soft a line against student-led protests. This pattern was repeated with Zhao Ziyang (1919–2005), an important ally to Deng in implementing economic reforms before 1987 and Hu's replacement as general secretary, who was placed under house arrest in 1989 (and stayed there until his death) for taking too soft a line on the Tiananmen Uprising (about which much more below). Deng's final heir apparent was Jiang Zemin (1926–), who took over as general secretary after Zhao's fall.

However, Jiang was not fully in charge until Deng's death. Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang in 2002, but, like Deng in his final years, Jiang continued to be an influential figure despite being officially "retired" and having relinquished most of his formal posts. In November 2012, Hu made a move similar to that of Jiang before him: from a formal holder of power to someone who influences political life, but does so from behind the scenes. Observers of Chinese politics, though, believe that Hu enjoys much less of a support base in the CCP than Jiang does, and it is unlikely that he will exert as much backstage control as Jiang did during Hu's time in power.

It is too early to make definite comments about Jiang's and Hu's eventual posthumous reputations. Both came up with or supported sayings and ideas—the “Three Represents” in Jiang's case, and the call for “Harmonious Society” in Hu's—that they hoped would have the kind of resonance that Deng's “Four Modernizations” and “To Get Rich Is Glorious” had. It seems highly unlikely, though, that historians of the future will look back on those concepts as crucially important. What each is likely to be identified with is the surprisingly smooth power transition of 2002. When Jiang passed the baton to Hu that year, it was the calmest transfer of authority between individuals China had seen in many decades.

The 2002 transition was supposed to set a precedent for future once-every-ten-year hand-offs, but the events of early 2012 underscored just how unusual the 2002 events were. The last year of Hu's time as party secretary got off to a very rocky start, as Bo Xilai, a leading contender for a position on the Standing Committee, was purged amid a murder scandal (about which more below). The 18th Party Congress, which most observers anticipated would be held in September or early October, did not take place until November, allegedly because of back-room squabbles among the party elite over which officials would be elevated to the powerful Politburo Standing Committee. When it did finally take place, though, it went smoothly, with no major last-minute surprises. The Standing Committee's size was reduced from nine members to seven, but that was expected. Many observers thought Hu would retain his military posts for a brief period after ceding his civilian ones, as Jiang had done before him, but instead these passed immediately to Xi. And Jiang was more of a public presence during the transition than some predicted he would be, which led to discussion of the continued strength of factions linked to him. None of these events, however, equaled the drama surrounding the Bo Xilai case that preceded the actual convening of the Congress.

What exactly did Deng do?

Deng Xiaoping's main foreign policy accomplishment, aside from brokering the deal over Hong Kong, was to normalize relations with Washington. As the first PRC leader to travel to the United States, in 1979, he was seen in Washington early on as the only head of a communist party with whom the United States could easily do business. He was responsible as well for the reestablishment of regular relations between Moscow and Beijing in the 1980s. One reason that the Tiananmen protests received such widespread international media coverage, in fact, was that when the protests began, Mikhail Gorbachev was in China taking part in a series of high-profile meetings with Deng that were supposed to cement the restoration of close ties between the world's two largest Communist states.

When Deng is remembered positively, however, it is above all not for what he did on the international front (where he was not always successful: a brief but costly war with Vietnam occurred under his watch at the end of the 1970s), but rather for his introducing a series of bold economic reforms that paved the way for China's two decades of record-breaking growth. These reforms were intended to temper Communist ideology with limited forms of private entrepreneurship, appeals for foreign investment, and a partial reduction of state control over agriculture and industry. The goal was to unleash pent-up entrepreneurial energy, revitalize farming by allowing the most productive farmers to sell some of their yield for profit, and promote “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” a unique economic system in which the state would still control much of the economy but that would allow greater room for free enterprise and decentralization than there had been in the era of Soviet-style five-year plans.

How is Deng viewed now?

Had he died before 1989, Deng would have gone down in history in both the West and in China as a celebrated figure. He

was admired for his pragmatism (in contrast to Mao, who emphasized ideological purity, Deng claimed he didn't care if a cat was a "black cat or a white cat" because if it caught mice, it was a "good cat") and for slogans that moved away from a focus on class struggle ("To Get Rich Is Glorious" was another of his best-known slogans). He was selected as *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" not once but twice, in 1978 and 1985. Only one previous Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek, who had been a personal favorite of Time-Life's chief, Henry Luce, had been given that honor even once—and when he had been singled out for it, he had to share it with his spouse, the only time that a "Man and Wife of the Year" were recognized by *Time*. Though there were many parts of Deng's policies that stopped short of representing a full embrace of capitalism, he was often described as creating a China that was more capitalist than Communist.

Currently, though Deng is officially venerated in China as a man who did great things for the nation, his international reputation is mixed. While he is associated with economic reforms that paved the way for China's transformation from a Third World economy to the world's third economy, he is also associated with a go-slow approach to political reforms, a man who elevated China's GDP and place in the world but crushed dissident movements, including the Democracy Wall protests of the late 1970s and, even more importantly, the Tiananmen Uprising. When an American academic published a sympathetic biography of Deng in 2011, many reviewers criticized the book's author for being far too kind to the late leader. Others acknowledged that Deng, like Mao, remains a complicated figure whose legacy is impossible to summarize in a single sound bite.²

What was the Democracy Wall movement?

The Democracy Wall movement was named for the place in Beijing where protesters began to put up manifestos, poems,

and other documents of dissent in the fall of 1978. The aims and rhetoric of the activists varied widely, as many were inspired by Marxist ideas or at least by critical strains within the Communist world (e.g., Yugoslavian reformist calls for a check on the tendency for cadres to become an elitist "new class" within state socialist settings), while others were influenced by liberal concepts. The *minzhu* in the 1970s' *minzhuqiang* (meaning "democracy wall," a term first used for a protest space in the late 1940s and then used in the same way during the Hundred Flowers period of the late 1950s) could, in other words, stand for many things, but primarily it expressed a desire for rulers more prepared to listen to the people sound their concerns.

At first, Deng seemed to think that it was a good thing that people were venting their hopes and frustrations. By the end of 1979, however, in a sort of replay of the Hundred Flowers campaign's conclusion, the government labeled the protests dangerous and imprisoned some of the boldest authors of posters.

The best-known Democracy Wall participant is Wei Jingsheng (1950–), who was imprisoned for many years for his activism and now lives in the United States as a political exile. His famous poster played upon Deng's policy of the "Four Modernizations," which emphasized the need for China to modernize work in the realms of agriculture, industry, technology, and defense. China also needed, Wei insisted, a "Fifth Modernization" (the name of his manifesto): democratic reform.

What is the real story of the Tiananmen Uprising?

Most Westerners over forty, though they may know little about the Democracy Wall movement, believe they understand the major facts of the Tiananmen Uprising, especially if they followed the drama in real time on television. And many Westerners younger than that think they know at least the basic outline of the course of events.

Yet, in many instances, the details have become scrambled in Western memory, with the complex story of Tiananmen reduced to a stand-off between a male "student"—though the man in question was probably a worker—and a line of tanks. A major source of confusion concerns who exactly died in the June 4th Massacre (more about that below); how these victims were killed (Westerners often assume most were crushed by tanks, but automatic weapons caused many more deaths); and where they were slain (not in Tiananmen Square, hence my avoidance of the term "Tiananmen Square Massacre," but in the streets near that giant plaza).

The Chinese government continues to insist that there was no massacre at all. They maintain instead that the event was simply an effort by soldiers—who showed great restraint when dealing with crowds, and sometimes lost their lives in the process—to put an end to a "counterrevolutionary riot" that disrupted life in China's capital, threatened the stability of the nation, and, if left unchecked, could have sent the country spiraling into the kind of disorder that had characterized the Cultural Revolution era.

That view of events has been labeled in the West, quite appropriately, the "Big Lie" about 1989. A few soldiers were killed, but they were not the only, or even the main, victims of the violence of early June. The government exaggerated greatly when raising the bogeyman of the Cultural Revolution, given that the protests of 1989 were largely nonviolent.

The Big Lie is not, however, the only widely but incorrectly disseminated version of key events. For example, many in the West continue to believe, erroneously, that most or all of those killed during the June 4th Massacre were students. In fact, most were members of other classes. They also continue to believe that the main slogans protesters rallied to in 1989 were calls for "democracy," when in reality there was much more emphasis at the time on the evils of corruption than on a desire for elections.

Students did take the lead in the initial protests, and one of their goals was to push for political reform. The Tiananmen Uprising was a sequel of sorts to an earlier wave of campus protests, which were, like those of 1989, rooted in a complex mix of frustrations and desires. The youths involved wanted more personal freedom and were frustrated with various aspects of university life, from compulsory calisthenics to the low quality of cafeteria food, and they wanted campus leaders to be chosen via open elections rather than being handpicked by the party. These protests swept through several Chinese cities in December 1986 (the biggest demonstrations occurred in Shanghai) and ended at the start of 1987 (with Beijing students making a New Year's Day march to Tiananmen Square).

There were some scattered protests in 1988, but the resurgence of a true movement did not come until April 1989. There were plans in the works for a demonstration on May 4, when the 80th anniversary of China's greatest student movement arrived, but a fluke event jump-started the struggle. This event was the mid-April death of Hu Yaobang, who had become a hero to the students when he was criticized and demoted for taking a soft line on the 1986–1987 protests.

Hu's death opened a window of opportunity for the students: when Hu died, he was still an official, albeit not a high-ranking one, so the state could hardly prevent people from gathering to mourn his passing. The students turned the occasion into an act of protest in addition to an expression of sadness when they began remarking what a shame it was when good men died, while bad ones lived on and stayed in control.

One key difference from the 1986–1987 protests was that, by the time the Tiananmen Uprising had peaked in May, it was much more than just a student movement. By then, the most important demonstrations involved members of many different social groups. Workers were particularly numerous in marches, drawn to the cause partly by the fact that, though students made democracy one of their watchwords, they spent

as much energy attacking the leadership for growing corrupt and failing to spread the fruits of economic development broadly enough. This criticism echoed powerfully throughout Chinese society at a time when inflation was rampant and it often seemed that the only people growing rich were the children of top leaders and those with high-level official connections.

Support from other classes peaked after students staged a hunger strike, an act that had special potency since lavish banquets had become a symbol of officials' selfish behavior. Tapping into a longstanding Chinese tradition of educated youths laying their bodies on the line to protect the nation, the hunger strikers were seen by many as having proved that they were far more deeply committed to the good of the country than were Deng and other party oligarchs.

Given the cross-class makeup of the crowds at the biggest marches—tens or hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and central squares of cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, while a million rallied in Beijing—it should not come as a shock to learn that the majority of the hundreds of people killed in early June (there is no official death toll, but that seems the likely size of it) were not students. Some students died, but the majority of those slain, both in Beijing and in the western city of Chengdu, where a massacre also occurred in early June, were workers and other ordinary city dwellers.³

Why hasn't the Chinese government changed its line on Tiananmen?

Many supporters of the Tiananmen movement hoped that, within a few years, the regime would reassess the protests of 1989. A similar set of 1976 demonstrations, which also centered on Tiananmen Square and which were also triggered in part by the death of an admired official—in that case, Zhou Enlai—were initially dubbed “counterrevolutionary riots” but

then, after Deng's rise, reassessed as a “patriotic” struggle. Relatives of slain students and workers, and human rights activists around the world, have pushed for a similar reassessment of the protests of 1989, but this has not come to pass.

One reason is that there has not been the kind of dramatic shift within the party leadership as occurred in the aftermath of the 1976 protests. Deng's 1978 rise signaled a dramatic turnaround, and he could logically interpret the 1976 protests as a precocious signal of support for his eventual assumption of power.

The situation relating to the June 4th Massacre is very different. There are various kinds of tensions within China's current leadership group, including ones between those linked to Jiang Zemin and those with closer ties to Hu Jintao (who in 1989 was a high-ranking official in Tibet, an area that also saw unrest that year). But all the main patrons of current leaders, and many of the leaders themselves, were closely associated with Deng and his policies and see themselves as continuing the reforms he started. They resist taking actions that could be regarded as repudiating Deng's vision for fear that doing so might, by extension, serve to undermine their own legitimacy.

What effect did the fall of other Communist governments have on China?

It would be easy to assume that the international climate during the last years of the previous century and the first years of this one was not conducive to regimes that are linked to the ideas of Karl Marx. This is debatable: some have claimed that the events of 1989 proved Marx wrong, once and for all, but others, including some at the center or on the right of the political spectrum, have claimed to have been struck, upon reading or rereading texts such as “The Communist Manifesto,” by Marx's ideas about what we now call globalization.⁴ Whatever the case may be, recent trends in world affairs, even if bad for

Marxism per se, have made it easier for the CCP to defend its distinctive current version of this creed.

Consider, for example, how well events of the 1990s fit in with the regime's assertion that China's national interest was best served by a strong state and emphasis on stability as something to be valued. For Beijing propagandists trying to argue for this point of view, the Yugoslavian descent into chaos was a godsend.

The collapse of order in that part of southeastern Europe allowed the CCP to point out, if not in these precise terms, that no matter how dissatisfied someone might be to live in a *Communist* state, there was a less appealing alternative out there: living in a *post-Communist* country such as those in the unstable and war-torn region that Tito had once governed. Furthermore, after NATO forces intervened to protect Kosovo, the CCP was able to claim that a post-Communist era involved not just economic collapse and widespread violence but also a loss of independence—an especially sore point in a nation that long suffered from imperialist encroachments.

The year 1989 presented a major challenge to the CCP that many thought it only barely managed to withstand: the protest wave that brought a million people into the streets of Beijing and onto the capital's biggest plaza and drew tens or hundreds of thousands into the central districts of scores of other cities. The party survived, but only, as we have seen, after Deng Xiaoping and the other oligarchs of his generation took a series of drastic steps. Specifically, they ordered the June 4th Massacre (*liusi*, or 6/4, remains the most common Chinese term for the events of 1989), they carried out a campaign of mass arrests, and they demoted Zhao Ziyang and placed him under house arrest. The other key event of 1989 was the rise to power of Jiang Zemin, the Shanghai leader who proved his skills to the oligarchs by taking a firm stand against the protests and restoring order in his city using only limited force.

The year was also a challenging one for Deng and his allies because Communist regimes fell in Budapest, Bucharest, and

other European capitals. In 1989, Solidarity rose to power in Poland (winning its first election on the very day that PLA soldiers were firing into crowds in Beijing), the Velvet Revolution occurred in Prague, and the Berlin Wall crumbled. And though the Soviet Union remained intact and under Communist Party rule, its days seemed numbered.

In the wake of these developments, it became the conventional wisdom outside of China that the group responsible for the June 4th brutality could not possibly hold on to power for long. The catchphrase was that the "End of History" had arrived and soon there would be no Communist states left. Throughout the 1990s, the notion that the CCP was unlikely to endure remained an article of faith for many Western journalists, academics, and policymakers, though there began to be more and more dissenting voices during the first years of the new century, as it became doubtful that the "Leninist extinction" (another phrase from the Western literature of the time) would affect Beijing.⁵

The tide has shifted even more recently. Many now agree that, barring unexpected events, the CCP is likely to be with us for some time to come. In fact, it can now claim, playing on a famous phrase attributed to Mark Twain, that reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated—and Communist Party leaders might not mind being linked to a line associated with that particular American author, given that he was a sharp critic of US imperialism and even wrote an editorial early in his career calling attention to the unfairness of the treaty-port system.

How did China's rulers avoid falling prey to the "Leninist extinction"?

One reason that Deng and Jiang were able to prove the skeptics wrong in the 1990s has already been noted: they have been able to point to the traumas experienced by some formerly Communist countries. Their 21st-century

successors have continued to do this, while also making corollary efforts to highlight and amplify any bad news relating to non-Communist countries where dictators or authoritarian groups have been overthrown. The Chinese state media made a great deal, for example, of how chaotic, dangerous, and strife-ridden Iraq became after Saddam Hussein was toppled. Here are four other factors worth stressing when seeking to understand the surprising longevity of the CCP.

First, the regime has made great and largely successful efforts to co-opt traditionally restive or particularly troublesome groups. Entrepreneurs who were frustrated by getting too little respect from the authorities and having too little influence in how China was run were among those who supported the 1989 protests and are now welcomed into the Communist Party. Intellectuals in post-1989 China have access to a much wider array of books and journal articles and can travel abroad more easily, and this has helped minimize, though not completely eradicate, their disaffection with the party, which led so many of them to support the Tiananmen protests. And the government has stopped micromanaging daily life on university campuses, which has similarly lessened the discontent of students, whose actions were crucial in 1989.

Second, the regime has followed a post-1989 strategy of patriotic education, emphasizing the party's historical ties to anti-imperialist movements. Like all of the other enduring Communist Party regimes (those of North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba) and unlike many of those that fell in 1989 (including those in Poland and Hungary), China's came to power via an independence struggle.

Also like the heads of those other regimes, China's leaders make overstated claims about the role their organization played in saving their country from imperialists and underplay the contributions of other groups, but all the Communist organizations still in power are justified in asserting ties to nationalist risings. In the Chinese case, the party's role in

anti-Japanese resistance battles is celebrated whenever the regime's legitimacy needs burnishing, and China's role in the Korean War (presented as an effort to free a neighboring government from foreign domination) is also commemorated.⁶

Third, the regime has worked hard to dramatically raise the standard of living and availability of consumer goods within its leading cities. This is something that none of the Communist Party regimes that fell late in the last century managed to do, and that failure helped bring about the collapse of those ruling groups. Purely political concerns, including frustration relating to issues of freedom of speech, contributed to dissatisfaction with the Communist regimes that fell in 1989, as did a sense, in many cases, that these governments were foreign impositions (stooges of Moscow), but material issues contributed, too. People living in East Berlin, for example, knew that on the other side of the Berlin Wall, in what had formerly been part of the same city, one could shop at much more attractive department stores and supermarkets. Comparable things could have been said in 1989 about the contrast between Shanghai and capitalist Taipei in Taiwan, but the difference is now gone. Europe's state socialist regimes claimed that they not only were morally superior to their capitalist rivals but also could compete with them materially. They could not, and it cost them. China's leadership has done a better job at quite literally delivering the goods.

Fourth, the regime has adopted a flexible strategy toward new protests that has worked well to prevent a new broad-based movement from taking shape. Mao famously said that a single spark could turn into a prairie fire. And China's leaders certainly do not govern a country where conflagrations are uncommon, since there are, by their own admission, tens of thousands of protests every year. They have thus far managed, however, by using different measures to deal with different sorts of unrest, to keep these many sparks from igniting another nationwide blaze.

How has the government responded to protests since 1989?

The authorities have used harsh measures to suppress some kinds of unrest and gone to extraordinary lengths to limit awareness of these actions. But it has taken a less draconian stance toward other sorts of resistance, at times even punishing local officials who have been criticized by protesters.⁷ This point deserves close scrutiny, since the Western press gives so much attention to patterns of dissent and moments of upheaval in the PRC, and because the mix of factors that determines how exactly the government responds to a particular protest is far from straightforward.

The calculus that tips the official response toward or away from outright repression is complex. Equally complicated is the decision about whether there will be a complete or merely partial effort to block information about what has occurred. Because of what happened during the Tiananmen Uprising and an awareness of the importance of cross-class protests in places such as Poland in the 1980s, movements involving members of more than one occupational or economic group are seen as particularly dangerous. Also key is how geographically dispersed dissenters are: purely local events—ranging from small-scale tax strikes to neighborhood discussions of new chemical plants—tend to be treated more leniently. A third factor that influences the severity of the regime's response, both toward protesters and toward domestic and foreign journalists seeking to cover events, is how well organized dissenters seem to be. The less evidence of careful coordination, the more likely the response will be to mollify crowds, rather than strike terror into them—and the more likely reporters will be allowed to cover the event.

For example, when the Arab Spring protest movement broke out in early 2011, the PRC government moved swiftly to ensure that nothing similar would take place in China. Though there was little sign that any "Jasmine" protests were even

planned, authorities initiated a widespread Internet crackdown and arrested a number of human rights lawyers and activists, including the prominent artist Ai Weiwei. Chinese leaders apparently feared the threat of a wide-ranging protest movement that could appeal to many different social groups and spark a repeat of the Tiananmen Uprising.

Later in 2011, however, events in the Guangdong province village of Wukan provided an example of how local protests can sometimes garner government approval, rather than censure. Wukan residents complained that their local Communist Party representatives were illegally seizing and selling villagers' land without providing fair compensation. One of the leading protestors then died under mysterious circumstances while in police custody, further escalating tensions, and villagers soon drove the party cadres out of town. Guangdong authorities initially blockaded Wukan and surrounded the village with security forces. But they soon began negotiating with the villagers and eventually reached a settlement: Wukan residents would be allowed to elect a new village party chief and the stand-off between the province and protestors would end.

Three additional facts are worth noting. First, geography helps determine whether a hard or soft line will be taken. Force definitely tends to be used much more swiftly when unrest occurs in frontier zones, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, where large percentages of the population do not belong to the majority Han group, and where economic grievances and anger associated with ethnic and religious divides make for a particularly volatile combination.

Second, the regime's relatively lenient treatment of some protests can be interpreted as a sign of self-confidence. The political scientist Kevin O'Brien has made a strong case that it is a mistake to treat reports that many protests occur as indicators of weakness. It may be a sign of regime strength that the government is ready, not just to admit that protests are

occurring, but sometimes even to allow people to let off steam without responding harshly.⁸

Finally, it seems that protestors in China have the greatest chance of achieving their objectives if they point out that what they seek is simply for the party to fulfill the concrete promises it has made to its citizens. Disputes over fair compensation for land taken by the government, for example, appear likely to be resolved relatively smoothly, as in Wukan. On the other hand, those who pursue bigger, more abstract goals—such as democracy or religious freedom—more frequently find themselves arrested and tried on charges of “inciting subversion of state power.”

Why and how has the CCP suppressed the Falun Gong movement?

A campaign of repression that has particularly baffled foreign observers is that which the regime quickly undertook to crush the Falun Gong sect just over a decade ago; likewise, the resoluteness of China’s policy toward the group since the suppression perplexes foreigners. When the crackdown began, the group in question had never engaged in a violent protest, and it seemed—to outsiders at least—to be simply a spiritual movement, chiefly involving the practice of meditation and gentle exercises known as *qigong*. Led by a man named Li Hongzhi—whose admittedly unusual ideas include claims to powers that many Westerners would consider akin to magical, and a version of “scientific facts” many would dub superstitions—the Falun Gong nonetheless did not have a political agenda. The fact that the Chinese government viewed the Falun Gong as a threat is easy to understand, however, using the rubric outlined above. That is, the threat derived from its adherents’ coming from all walks of life (even some CCP officials had joined it), being popular throughout the country (cells formed in many cities), and showing a capability for coordinated action. This capability manifest itself in April 1999, when ten

thousand protesters assembled outside the Beijing compound where China’s highest leaders live and staged a sit-in demanding an end to official criticism of the group.

Other reasons have been given for the ruthless campaign against Falun Gong. A leading scholar of the subject, the historian David Ownby, stresses the ideological challenge that the Falun Gong posed to the CCP even before it began to present the party as an evil organization (something that occurred after the crackdown against its members began). Ownby convincingly argues that the CCP was threatened by Li’s novel fusion of Chinese traditions and modern “science,” for the party claims a monopoly on bringing together what it means to be both Chinese and modern via the “scientific” socialism of Marx.⁹

The CCP response to the Falun Gong needs to be seen as a special case for other reasons as well. For example, during imperial times, Chinese regimes were sometimes weakened or overthrown by millenarian religious movements, including some that began as quiescent self-help sects. And the party is especially concerned about protests that have ties with charismatic figures, of whom Li would surely be one. That said, the CCP response still illustrates the general pattern described above of struggles being treated as most serious when they are multiclass, geographically widespread, and organized.

Who are the Chinese dissidents now?

One common mistake that Americans, and some other foreigners, no doubt, make is to assume that in China one is either a dissident (who boldly challenges the government and ends up in prison or in exile) or a loyalist (who follows the regime’s line, whether out of belief or fear). In fact, however, there have always been and definitely still are many people in the middle.

On the extreme loyalist end of the spectrum, there are those who make their careers doing work designed to shore up and

promote the policies of China's current leaders. And on the opposite end are those who openly confront the authorities and at times, such as when they form opposition parties, seem to be daring the state to take steps to silence them. But most Chinese fall somewhere between these extremes. Lingering Cold War assumptions tempt one to assume that there are no "critical intellectuals" in state socialist countries, but in China they certainly exist. They do not directly challenge the authority of the CCP yet do criticize aspects of the established order.

Many artists and writers operate in a "gray zone," where they bend or even flout the rules to evade the PRC's censorship mechanisms, but do not confront the government outright. Instead, they make careful judgment calls about how far they can push before the authorities will push back. Authors, especially, are taking advantage of the power of the Internet, which allows them to disseminate writings without going through official publishing channels. And some, like novelist and essayist Yu Hua (1960-), publish their more controversial works in Hong Kong and Taiwan, or arrange for English-language versions of their most challenging pieces to appear in foreign publications, thus remaining free to live on the mainland.¹⁰

There are also activist lawyers who generally work within the system, yet take up cases by people struggling to call attention to specific abuses by local officials. And there are members of various single-issue NGOs who publicize what they see as flawed government policies relating to topics such as AIDS or the environment, yet do not advocate any kind of radical change in government. One example is the self-taught blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng (1971-), who has filed lawsuits and organized opposition to forced abortions and other extreme methods of enforcing China's One-Child Policy. Chen was jailed from 2006 to 2010, then placed under house arrest until April 2012, when he escaped and fled to the US embassy in Beijing. Though the Chinese government eventually allowed him to leave China and enroll as a special student at New York

University's law school, Chen has maintained that he hopes to return to China and continue his work there.

Someone who might fit into the more conventional Western image of a dissident is avant-garde artist Ai Weiwei (1957-), who lived in New York for over a decade before returning to China in 1993 and who seems to delight in provoking the Chinese government. At one point, Ai was an artistic consultant on the "Bird's Nest" stadium constructed for the Beijing Olympics, but he then turned against the project and denounced the Games as propaganda for the CCP. Ai attracted the most government displeasure, though, when he began investigating the deaths of over five thousand schoolchildren who perished as a result of poorly constructed schools that collapsed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Ai listed the children's names on his blog, which was then shut down by the authorities. In the spring of 2011, security forces arrested Ai and held him for alleged "economic crimes." (He was later charged with income tax evasion.) Detained for over two months, Ai was then permitted to return to his Beijing home, though he remains under surveillance and cannot leave the country.

When Mo Yan (1955-) was given the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, some commentators used the contrast between his career and Ai's to chide the Swedish judges for making a foolish choice. Whereas Ai's art challenged the state, they claimed, Mo's supported it. Whereas Ai was censored and bullied, Mo was lauded and served as a vice chairman of the official Writer's Association. There are crucial differences between the two, which Mo himself underscored in some of the statements he made after winning the prize, claiming in one that censorship could benefit rather than harm artists. It is also worth noting, though, that some of Mo's writings have veered at least tentatively into the "gray zone," if not as daringly as those of Yu Hua (a member, though not a vice chairman, of the Writer's Association). Mo is no "dissident," but his writings are not devoid of elements of social critique. He can be caustic about the corrosive effects of government

corruption on communities, albeit taking aim at local officials only—a far safer target than national ones.¹¹ Mo has stayed far enough inside the confines of the safe zone to be celebrated by the Chinese leadership for his Nobel Prize, a story very different from that of the PRC's previous Nobel Prize winner, Liu Xiaobo.

Who is Liu Xiaobo?

Liu Xiaobo (1955–) had been an activist in China for two decades before many in the West ever heard his name, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. In the 1980s, Liu was a rising star in academia, renowned for his path-breaking work on literary criticism. His academic career came to an end, though, when Liu joined the Tiananmen protests and emerged as one of the leaders of the moderate faction that wanted to leave the square peacefully. Liu was arrested soon after the June 4th Massacre and imprisoned for almost two years. Resuming his work as an outspoken political activist and writer upon his release, Liu has repeatedly been detained and placed under house arrest. On December 25, 2009, he was sentenced to an eleven-year term for “inciting subversion of state power,” a charge brought about by his role in composing “Charter 08” the year before. Liu and other dissidents took the inspiration for this document from Václav Havel’s “Charter 77”; they asked the government for democratic reforms, an independent judiciary, and freedom of expression. Circulated online, the petition received thousands of signatures.

Liu was the first PRC citizen to win a Nobel Prize, but the Chinese government expressed no joy at the news. Authorities denounced the award and relations between China and Norway grew chilly (though the Nobel committee is an independent organization not under the control of the Norwegian government). Nineteen countries with ties to China—including Russia, Cuba, Iraq, and Venezuela—boycotted the award ceremony in Oslo, and the PRC prevented Liu’s wife and friends

from attending the event on his behalf by refusing to let them exit the country. After the chairman of the prize committee read the citation honoring Liu, the audience gave an extended standing ovation to the empty chair where Liu was meant to have sat.¹²

What is the role of the Internet in political dissent?

It would be easy to imagine that the Chinese Internet is a hotbed of political dissent, particularly since the government sometimes seems preoccupied with silencing (often in a clumsy fashion) discordant voices. But for many—perhaps even most—young Chinese, the Internet is simply an entertainment outlet: a place where they can chat with friends, make purchases, and play games late into the night (leading to a number of articles in the press about the dangers of Internet addiction). And while there are a few prominent outspoken bloggers, such as the racecar driver and writer Han Han (1982–), who might be the most widely read blogger in the world, many others are not interested in promoting political change. Yet they remain passionate about being able to express their opinions about topics that interest them and to follow stories that strike them as important.¹³

One venue where critical voices do tend to proliferate and attract censure from the authorities is the Twitter-like microblogging platforms called Weibo. Users often post stories of corruption and official malfeasance, which censors rush to take down from the site before the posts can be picked up by others. Despite the rumored tens of thousands of censors the government employs, however, removing Weibo posts is much like playing a game of Whac-A-Mole: as quickly as the content is deleted in one location, it pops up in another. And though censors can block particular terms on Weibo sites, users are adept at finding innocuous homophones (using different written characters) to evade those blocks. It might appear, then, that

a Weibo poster is complaining about his dislike of river crabs (*hexie*), but savvy readers will understand that his real target is the "Harmonious Society" (*hexie shehui*) program that Hu Jintao made his signature effort while he was China's president.

What does the digital divide mean in China?

It has become common to refer to the existence of a "digital divide" that separates those who use the web from those who do not. The digital divide persists in most of the world, of course, and is further characterized by some people having their own laptop and fast Internet access, for example, whereas others can use the Internet only at a cybercafé, and still others have only occasional access to a computer with a slow connection.

In China, however, there is another level of distinction due to the government's sophisticated censorship mechanisms, which some refer to as constituting "the Great Firewall of China" and others describe as the working of the "Net Nanny." These tools strive to make some sites inaccessible and to ensure that searches for sensitive terms yield either no results or only links that provide government-sanctioned information.

A search for the term "June 4" will likely retrieve no results at all, for example, and a search for "Tiananmen" will deliver links to official sites devoted to the square but not point the searcher to overseas sites containing student manifestos issued at Tiananmen in 1989. There are, however, ways to circumvent the "Great Firewall" and frustrate the Net Nanny's plans; these involve proxy servers and VPNs—tools that, in a sense, make it seem as though a computer located in China is actually based somewhere else. This creates another divide among Internet users in China, separating those who are versed in using such techniques from those who are not.

Still another divide, which is less absolute, is between what could be called critical and noncritical users of the web. There

are those who do not think much about the nature of information provided online and whether it reinforces or challenges official viewpoints. There are also, though, some readers and writers who access the mainland's controlled web largely, though not exclusively, with an eye toward conveying or consuming alternative views of current affairs. They take pride in posting provocative comments that can stay online at least temporarily due to clever forms of wording, from using "river crab" to refer to "harmony" to using the Chinese terms for the imaginary date of "May 35th" to allude to June 4th, a date that is taboo in Chinese media since it was when the 1989 massacre took place. Han Han is a master at crafting enigmatic, satiric, or allegorical posts that are able to stay up at least briefly because censors are not sure what to make of them. When Liu Xiaobo received the Nobel Prize, for example, Han Han's blog simply carried a pair of quotation marks with nothing between them, something that many readers eventually concluded meant that he had much he wanted to say, but that none of it would be allowed. And in another post, which might put an American reader in mind of a Stephen Colbert faux polemic, he extolled the virtues of the controversial Three Gorges Dam in a way that made it clear to savvy readers that he was actually deeply concerned about its environmental impact and other problems.

For every Han Han and related writer, there are millions of Chinese Internet readers who may not engage in word play or veiled political commentary themselves, but enjoy finding it online. This helps explain Han Han's enormous popularity, though his celebrity status as a successful rally driver and novelist and his good looks—all of which keep him on magazine covers—play a part as well. When his blog posts get wiped off the web, like scrubbed-out Weibo messages, they often live on via being placed on other sites. This reposting, which may be done by people who never or rarely blog themselves, blurs the line between producers and consumers of challenging online content.

*Is the Great Firewall of China
a unique structure?*

The Chinese government's Internet policies, like its policies in frontier zones such as Xinjiang, can cause one to overstate the distinctiveness of the PRC. Contributing to a vision of uniqueness in this case is nomenclature. The term "Great Firewall of China" is a clever one. It offers a nice rhetorical twist on the country's best-known landmark. And it is not only Western commentators who use it; many Chinese bloggers who try to circumvent the censors have had fun with the phrase as well—so much so that references to and images of "wall climbers" became very popular in Chinese cyberspace in 2009.¹⁴ And yet, we are led astray if we allow the term to fool us into thinking that what the Chinese government is doing vis-à-vis the Internet has no foreign parallels.

In fact, many regimes strive to limit the kinds of materials that can be accessed online within the territories they govern. The Iranian government is a case in point. Similarities between Chinese and Iranian bloggers had been noted before, but the China-Iran Internet control analogies became particularly clear in June 2009. The month opened with Beijing officials trying to limit online discussion of the 20th anniversary of the 1989 protests and ended with their counterparts in Tehran clamping down on social media such as Twitter and generally employing related strategies—though in a less sophisticated and slower manner than the Chinese authorities—in a largely unsuccessful effort to curtail the spread of information about a popular movement.¹⁵

Nonauthoritarian regimes also seek to control what is said online, limiting certain kinds of communications (often those deemed "pornographic"). Some of the precise measures that the Chinese regime uses to defang the Internet are distinctive, but Beijing's leaders are not in a class all their own. This is why I prefer the term "Net Nanny," which encourages us to think of the PRC as one of a variety of places (along with Singapore

and Saudi Arabia, for example) in which a good deal of energy is spent trying to get Internet users to go to preferred sites and to steer clear of what the state deems "harmful" modes of online behavior.¹⁶

*Why were the 2008 Olympics such
a big deal for China?*

Large-scale spectacles, including the National Day parades held on October 1 every ten years (most recently in 2009), have long played important roles in the political life of the PRC. Recently, the government has emphasized hosting high-profile international gatherings, from summits to film festivals to large-scale sporting events, that bring people from around the world to China. The Beijing Games were the biggest spectacle of this kind ever held in the PRC.

The government greeted with enthusiasm the news in 2001 that the Chinese bid for the 2008 Games had been accepted. There was a great deal of popular excitement about the Games, too, as many Chinese were well aware that the Olympics are now the most attention-grabbing mega-event in the world, one that gives considerable prestige to countries chosen to host the Summer Games in particular.

At the same time, people were not always happy with the preparations necessary to stage the Games. For example, the Olympics-related building boom required many long-term Beijing residents to relocate to less central districts. When residents felt that the compensation offered was appropriate and replacement accommodations an improvement, they made the move willingly. But some felt that the deals offered were too stingy or were distressed at having to abandon neighborhood ties and memory-filled haunts. Developers were often accused of bullying tactics and taking unfair advantage of official connections. Beijing also went to unusual lengths to upgrade its ground transportation system and built a completely new state-of-the-art airport.

What does the handling of the Beijing Games say about today's China?

The unusually elaborate preparations for the Beijing Games and other international events, including the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, touted as an "Economic Olympics," suggest that there is an unusual intensity to China's concern with mega-events. But it has been common for countries that are rising rapidly in global hierarchies to start hosting both Olympics and World's Fair-like spectacles, something that the United States did between 1876 (the year of the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, the first North American World's Fair) and the early 1900s (when the country began playing host to the Games).

The most important general point about World's Fairs (formerly the dominant international mega-events) and the Summer Olympics (the spectacle that currently holds that distinction, due partly to the rise of television and the way they lend themselves to visual media coverage) is that they often have the effect of symbolically dividing countries into different categories, according to the degree of economic development, military might, integration into the global order, or some combination of these three things—with those seen as able to host major mega-events placed at the top of the heap.

It is no mere coincidence that when World's Fairs were dominant, they were often staged in Western European cities that were the capitals of major empires. Paris hosted four between 1855 and 1900, while London hosted two of the first three ever staged. It is also no coincidence that several of the first major international exhibitions outside of Europe were held in the United States, when the United States was rapidly industrializing, becoming much more urban, and beginning to assert itself forcefully on the global stage—as China is now.

In China, the country's dream to become the kind that can host an Olympics dates to the early 1900s, and so, too, does the country's dream to someday host a World's Fair (a 1902 science fiction story by a famous Chinese intellectual imagined

an international exhibition in Shanghai in the then far-off year of 1962). Also dating back to that time is China's dream to become the kind of country that could produce athletes who would win medals at the Games.

The significance of this last dream was intimately tied to a political concern: a desire to shed the nation's global reputation as the "sick man of Asia" (a phrase that resonates with the Ottoman Empire's earlier nickname, the "sick man of Europe"). This vision of Chinese weakness, which followed the Qing defeats at the hands of, first, militarily superior Western powers and then Japan, was one that nationalists of all political stripes were eager to shed.

The emphasis that both Mao and Chiang Kai-shek placed on physical education in their early writings, and the public displays of stamina that the former exhibited later in life (such as his famous swims in the Yangzi River), is relevant here as well. The quest for Olympic glory, both in terms of winning numerous medal counts and the Games, can thus be seen in part as an expression of China's desire to put behind it once and for all any lingering sense that it is a weak country.

Will grand spectacles continue to be important to China?

Post-Olympic China has continued to be and will likely remain a country that regularly holds grand spectacles. Some have raised the possibility that China will seek to hold another Olympics within the next few decades. There is also talk of trying to mount a Chinese bid for the athletic event that is currently second only in global import to the Olympics: the FIFA World Cup.

Mega-events of this sort, which are sponsored by international organizations, play a role in confirming a vision, based partly in official myth but also partly in tangible reality, that China is a once powerful country that was laid low for a time

and has now risen again to a more natural status. They show that China has gone from being the kind of country that could only play minor roles in the great World's Fairs of the 1800s (in which it was treated as a "backward" country that should display "exotic" aspects of its culture rather than a "modern" one that should display its latest machines and canons) to being the kind that can host 21st-century counterparts to those attention-getting and status-conveying extravaganzas.

The Chinese government is also seeking to confirm its new global status by investing in its space program. Though China did not stage its first manned space flight until 2003, the country has plans to construct a permanent space station and send astronauts to the moon. This comes at a time when the United States and Russia, for decades the major players in space exploration, are scaling down their programs. At the moment, it seems that the Chinese leadership is willing to spend the money necessary to make the PRC the global leader in space within a decade or two.

What is the "One-Child Family" Policy?

This name, often used in the West to refer to China's post-1979 birth control program, is somewhat misleading—hence my use of quotation marks.

It is misleading first because exceptions have always been made that allow some couples to have more than a single child, including, for most of the drive's history, non-Han couples, and second, because it has been less a unified national policy—suggesting an overall plan for implementation—than a multifaceted effort to promote a target for population limitation, which local officials are expected to reach via means of their own devising.

The basic aim of the drive is simple: to limit the size of Chinese families, by ensuring that most couples have one or at most two children. A mixture of methods has been used to achieve this goal, ranging from implementing an intensive

publicity campaign to pressuring people with one or two offspring to have no more.

There were many reasons this policy was bound to draw criticism in the West—and particularly in the United States, given the volatility of American debates about abortion. Some demographers questioned whether, even though China had a baby-boom generation reaching childbearing age in the late 1970s and 1980s (Mao had pronounced that a great strength of the PRC was the vast number of people it had), policies this stringent were ever needed to keep the country's population in check. And recently there have been signs of a loosening of strictures on birth rates, due to worries that the nation will face a labor shortage as its number of senior citizens burgeons.¹⁷

In addition, international opponents of abortion, a particularly significant group in the United States (a minority but a very vocal one), were angered that family-planning workers treated this as an ordinary method for ending an unwanted pregnancy. The pressure put on local officials to ensure that their communities met stringent birth limitation quotas meant that there were, from the start, inevitably cases in which young women were pressured unduly to terminate their pregnancies, even bullied or forced into having abortions.

Many Americans were prone to view with distaste a setting in which the government interfered so intensely in matters thought of as deeply private concerns, as occurred when work units used "period police" to monitor whether women were menstruating, and when bureaucrats made a family's decision about when exactly to start a family and how many children they could have.¹⁸ There were also disturbing echoes of discredited eugenic ideas in some of the propaganda that accompanied the policy initially, which referred to the need for fewer but "better" children to be born—though this was partly offset when exemptions to have additional offspring were granted to China's fifty-five official recognized *shaoshu*

minzu (literally, minority nationalities; i.e., everyone who is not ethnically Han Chinese).

Was female infanticide encouraged to help limit population size?

No—though sometimes Americans have erroneously thought this was the case.

The early 1980s did see a resurgence of female infanticide (a practice that was known in prerevolutionary China but diminished rapidly after 1949) and there were also some sex-selective abortions by couples determined to have at least one son. The combination of these two things led to skewed sex ratios in some rural locales, where many more boys than girls survive the first years of childhood—a phenomenon that many inside the PRC view not only as morally troubling but also as something that could have profound social consequences as young men become frustrated by the lack of potential marriage partners.¹⁹

Where misunderstanding has come in has been when, in the United States, Chinese female infanticide and sex-selective abortions have been presented as part of the One-Child Policy. Far from being true, these actions, and husbands' (or in-laws') abusing women who bear daughters instead of the sons they would prefer, are better understood as acts of *resistance* to the One-Child Policy. After all, one of its key tenets, as evidenced by the constant use of happy lone infant daughters on posters extolling the virtues of small families, has been that couples should be just as delighted to have a single female child as a single male one.²⁰

When family members show displeasure with female children or, in the most extreme cases, end the lives of these infants, they are going against—not conforming to—dictates from on high. The Chinese government can be taken to task for failing to fight hard enough to counter the preference for sons. And some recent policies have inadvertently worked

to reinforce the bias toward male children. Most notably, in a time of increasing privatization of agriculture, in a country where it has never stopped being the norm for rural brides to move to their husbands' households (this is one thing that the New Marriage Law of 1950 did nothing to alter), there is a strong economic incentive to have a child who is likely to bring labor power into the family via marriage. A woman, on the other hand, takes her labor with her when she marries and departs, so that her labor power benefits her in-laws more than it does her own parents. There is a difference, however, between saying that the Chinese authorities could have done much more to minimize female infanticide or that their policies inadvertently contributed to its rise and saying that it was an element of government policy.

Is contemporary China utterly unique?

China's current hybrid economic and political system defies easy categorization, and the PRC's post-Mao and (to an even greater extent) post-Tiananmen trajectory seems to have broken several basic rules of historical development. Never before has a process of industrialization and urbanization occurred so rapidly, and on a canvas so vast. This makes China's rise seem very different from the rapid growth that occurred in nearby Asian countries, such as Singapore.

In addition, no other Communist Party has ever overseen a period of runaway economic growth like China's. This sets the CCP apart not just from the state socialist regimes that fell from power late in the last century but also from the enduring ones, such as that of North Korea, with its failing economy, and those of Cuba and Vietnam (each doing much better than North Korea but still not experiencing successive years of high growth rates comparable to those of the PRC).

There is, moreover, something special about the way that China confounds categorization along a capitalist/socialist axis. For example, many countries, including Scandinavian

ones such as Sweden, can be aptly described as combining elements of "capitalism" and "socialism," and there are also many nations (including the United States) where the line between the governmental and private sectors can get very blurry, thanks in part to officials in one administration becoming consultants to industry as soon as they are out of power. Still, the borders in today's China between its "capitalist" and "socialist" and "bureaucratic" and "business" sectors are especially tricky to draw.

This is because China's boom has been fueled by entrepreneurial activity and foreign investment, yet large state-run enterprises not only remain in operation but also continue to be a major force within the overall economy. Moreover, many of the new "private" companies one hears about turn out to be run by the children of CCP leaders, and some luxury hotels that seem to epitomize the anti-capitalist Maoist state's retreat are business ventures of the People's Liberation Army that Mao once led to victory.²¹

It is useful up to a point to think of China as a country of "crony capitalism," a term that has been used to describe certain Latin American countries and India at specific points in its history. Even this phrase, though, does not seem to quite "scratch where it itches" (to borrow a Chinese colloquialism), in terms of accurately characterizing what is going on in the country now.²²

It is also useful, again up to a point, to view China under the control of leaders who, to borrow a term from Andrew J. Nathan, engage in adaptive authoritarianism. This would place it in the category of other countries, such as Vladimir Putin's Russia, that are the focus of William J. Dobson's 2011 study, *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, a book that emphasizes the degree to which current authoritarian figures make use of new media and take a pragmatic and often only vaguely ideological approach to staying in power. One difference here, though, is that while many of the countries Dobson focuses on are run by charismatic individuals, recent

Chinese leaders, especially the colorless Hu Jintao, are anything but.

In light of contradictory and confusing factors such as these, and given how difficult it is to place the PRC into any of the categories routinely used to categorize nations, it is easy to see why many analysts have felt that it is best to characterize China by way of newly coined terms that emphasize its unusual aspects. Nicholas Kristof, for example, has created the neologism "Market-Leninism," and some political scientists have referred to "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" (a play upon official talk of "socialism with Chinese characteristics").²³ These terms have value, but it is dangerous to overstate China's exoticness. A precise mix of elements does make the PRC's trajectory *sui generis*, but many things going on there parallel those that have occurred or are occurring in other countries.

What does China have in common with other countries?

Many phenomena can be cited to illustrate the seductiveness, but also the problem, with highlighting China's "distinctiveness" over its commonalities with other countries. Consider, for example, the way China and India tend to be discussed together. The two countries are usually presented as a study in contrasts because only the latter has a federal system (that gives states great autonomy), and the former does not hold elections (while the latter is routinely described as the world's biggest democratic nation). The developmental paths of the "Dragon" and the "Elephant" are seen as representing two very different roads.

There are many ways, however, in which the experiences of the two most populous countries in Asia, and indeed the world, can be compared to highlight similarities, and thereby shed light on one another. The PRC, like India, took its modern form as a nation-state in the 1940s, and in the 1950s economic

five-year plans were the order of the day in each country. By the 1960s, Cold War visions of a clear Communist/Free World binary notwithstanding, Chinese and Indian leaders were each trying to find a place for their country that kept it out of both the shadow of the United States and the shadow of the Soviet Union. Then in the late 1970s, both places sought to discover a developmental path that was unique, and Chinese and Indian political figures alike became fascinated by the Singapore model. Despite the enormous differences in scale between this city-state and China and India, Singapore was a polity that had suffered under imperialism and then, after independence, experienced an economic boom.

Once China and India are thought of as sharing important characteristics, in addition to having many distinctive features, developments in one country can be used to illuminate those in the other. The Chinese interest in using mega-events to show that the PRC is now a "modern" rather than a "backward" country, for example, has an Indian parallel. New Delhi hosted the 2010 Commonwealth Games, an Olympic-like spectacle preceded by an ambitious urban redevelopment drive that, while not as costly and over-the-top as that which preceded the Beijing Games, brought to mind the lead-up to 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremonies. There was a great deal of hand-wringing in the Indian press at the time of China's Olympic success because Indians feared it would be difficult for India to put on as polished a show. But this only underlines the similar ambitions within each country to use dramatic acts to shed the sense of backwardness they have carried from a time when Western empires dominated the world.

There are many other topics where China-India comparisons that stress similarity rather than difference can be useful. Take, for instance, the violence that erupted in Xinjiang in the summer of 2009, which the Indian journalist Pallavi Aiyar, who spent several years as the *Hindu* newspaper's Beijing bureau chief, says is often "served up" by the Western press as "the latest evidence of a stand-off between an oppressive

dictatorship, and freedom-loving innocents." While this "framing [of] the 'story'" of an event that left 180 people dead (more of them Han Chinese than Uighurs) "fits in neatly with the West's evangelical prescriptions for political change in China," according to Aiyar, "reading the Xinjiang riots as primarily a showdown between the State and citizens is misleading." A more apt approach is to place it into the same category of interethnic, religiously inflected outbursts of communal violence with which the residents of many parts of India have become all too familiar in recent years.

Here is the clear-eyed, concise synopsis of the events leading up to and following the July 2009 violence that Aiyar offers, which approaches the story in a manner free of Cold War categorizations of the sort she criticizes:

In Xinjiang, members of the indigenous Uighur minority complain of discrimination and racism from the majority Han ethnicity. The Han, in turn, say the Uighurs are a pampered, ungrateful lot. A relatively small incident... lights a match to the tinderbox of communal tensions. Rioting by Uighurs leads to retaliatory rampages by Han. Han and Uighur neighbours, who have lived for years in peace, suddenly look at each other with suspicion....

Echoes of India's own minority-majority clashes are loud and clear.²⁴

Aiyar does not gloss over the role that Beijing's policies, including economic ones that have helped Han living in the region get rich faster than others, have played in exacerbating tensions in Xinjiang. But she insists that, when viewed through eyes accustomed to India, to overlook the communal violence side of the problem is to miss one of its most significant features. And she notes that when violence between Muslim and non-Muslim groups breaks out in India, state backing for the latter is often even more lopsided than state backing for the

Han is in Xinjiang. That many more Uighur than Han “rioters” have been arrested in the ongoing crackdown precipitated by the July 2009 violence is certainly an important fact to bring into the picture, but it just adds a further dimension rather than undermining the value of Aiyar’s framing of the tale.

China has always been unique in some specific ways, due to its distinctive history and the sheer size of its population, which is rivaled only by that of India. It has also followed a political path that, in certain regards, is unlike that of any other place. However, to make sense of the country’s current situation, we need to balance consideration of what sets it apart from other places with how it is like other nations. And one country that Americans should realize has important things in common with today’s China, as we will see in the next chapter, is their own.

5

US-CHINA MISUNDERSTANDINGS

*What is the most common thing
Americans get wrong about China?*

The preceding chapters have drawn attention to some important sources of US misunderstanding of Chinese realities. Discussion of the “One-Child Family” campaign, for example, drew attention to a tendency, which shows up in regard to other issues as well, for Americans to treat unintended side effects of a Chinese government policy as part of the policy itself, while comments on the Tiananmen Uprising showed how recent historical events are sometimes misconstrued. Americans are also inclined—as a result of pronouncements coming out of and pageants staged in Beijing—to accept as a simple truth the mythic notion of an enduring and relatively unchanged “5,000-year-old” Chinese civilization.

The most deeply rooted and persistent US misconception about China, though, deserves some extended discussion. This is Americans’ too-limited appreciation of China’s diversity, which leads to a view that China is populated by people who are all pretty much alike, or, at least, who can be neatly divided into one large group and a small number of people who stand apart. We have seen examples of this already, including in the mistaken idea that, in political terms, China now has only “loyalists” and “dissidents,” but there are many