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Thirty Years of Chinese Reforms: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

China's reform agenda is understood in the light of a thirty-year process. Interpretations of reforms differ according to the meaning of the word. Should Mao's heirs be seen as Leninist reformists, or as reformers in the historical Chinese sense, aiming at transformation in response to the West? The implications are contradictory. The reforms have been successful, yet their term has never been clearly defined. Reforms have been described alternatively as another phase in China's cyclical history, or as a transitional phase, or even as a change towards a hybrid regime with cultural Chinese features. China has had 'true reformers', aiming at fundamental change. Their legacy is still present and Chinese society is eager for economic and social debate. However, actual reform has reached a plateau. The Party's undiminished monopoly on political ideas, its legitimization through nationalist pride, its hold over the media and communications, as well as global vindication of its cautiousness, all hint of a neo-classical restoration era. However, a new wave of reforms may question again the nature of China's political system.

Key words: *China, reform, political liberalization, transition, consolidation, cyclical phase*

Introduction

Thirty years is a long time for reform and indeed one might more aptly speak of the reform era in the People's Republic of China's history. China itself has chosen to celebrate on the thirtieth anniversary of the December 1978 third plenary meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Eleventh Central Committee, which increased grain procurement prices and began reversing the Cultural Revolution-era verdicts against many individuals. It is officially designated as the start of China's reform era. In fact, Deng Xiaoping and some of his lieutenants such as Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu had begun brewing these reforms as early as 1975, first on agricultural policy, and at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Lu 2001). A full-blown press campaign had started in the summer of 1978,

revealing wounds and blemishes from the previous era and weakening Mao's first successors.

This celebration is therefore a tribute to the Party's reformist leaders who put China on its present course and it also serves to signal again a distance from the first leader of the PRC, Mao Zedong. But it may also signal the end of the Reform era and of a transitional generation in the history of Chinese communism, which suffered through the acute 'line struggle' of the CCP (Teiwes and Sun 1999: 7) and went on to create the kind of economy and society that Mao himself would have rejected outright.

In some ways the reform agenda has been accomplished today, especially if one takes a broader historical perspective: the sight, for example, of a PRC endowed with US$2.5 trillion (including probable unofficial holdings abroad) of foreign currency reserves[1] and busy recruiting financiers from the defunct Lehman Brothers, goes beyond even the wildest historical predictions. Even if this is a temporary imbalance resulting from globalization and 'Chinamerica',[2] it is still an indication of success by any criteria. Let's not forget, China now has the world's second or third largest military budget (depending on where one places Russia), and will soon have, among other arms systems, its first aircraft carrier, perhaps named the Mao Zedong. It would seem that the late nineteenth-century goals of wealth and power have been met and exceeded.

Yet, from another point of view, reform has been contained within boundaries set at the very beginning. Deng Xiaoping's celebrated statement on the Four Basic Principles in March 1979[3]—among which the main principle is the CCP's sole leadership—still stands. Any debate on political reform we may entertain remains subordinate to that reality. The Party, the state and more generally public levers into the economy and society are today stronger, if less brutal, than they were in 1976. This could not have been predicted in the late 1980s. Even more significantly, China's inordinate success, which is not confined to financial statistics or economic growth rates, is increasingly seen as having something to do with the success of the CCP. This bolsters claims for authoritarian management elsewhere, although the cultural ingredients in China's recipes actually make it less likely that it can be replicated elsewhere. Just as reform, as we shall see below, has political roots in the Communist movement as well as a Chinese historical origin, claims for the success of authoritarianism are both political and cultural (Peerenboom 2007).

For a considerable time after 1978, political reform was thought to lag behind economic reform. Yet from 1975 to 1989, reform occurred under conditions of political line struggle within the Party, a process that was less and less violent, but still quite open and often very decipherable by outside observers. Increasingly, since Deng Xiaoping forged the concept of a 'core leadership' in 1989, we have been reduced to educated guesses about any political line struggle, although factional and personal affiliations clearly matter a great deal in China. There are now more voices, in China and even abroad, that would consider a wealthy and strong China, ruled through laws if not by law itself, viable without more fundamental political reforms. In 1997 (at Deng's death) and more decidedly in 2002-03 (the move from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao), institutionalized succession under conditions of authoritarianism happened in a largely planned and orderly manner. 'Democracy' itself, a word that recurs frequently in top leader pronouncements,[4] has taken on ambiguous meanings, from the domestic scene where it is equated with due process and control, to international relations where it is largely synonymous with the sovereignty of nation-states and limits to international governance.

Historical Reformers or Leninist Reformism?

Whether post-1976 leaders are historical reformers or reformists in the Leninist sense really depends on the perspective that is adopted about the reform process itself. Has it been, and is it still, just a stage in the long course of the CCP's exercise of power and in the making of Chinese socialism? Are the leaders who have conducted the process since 1978 therefore 'reformists' in the old sense of the word to the Marxist-Leninist tradition? That is to say, are they tinkerers and adaptors at the political 'right', in the old Communist sense, of the main political line, which remains steadfastly driven by Leninism, and is in fact, in the Maoist version of Leninism, the 'mass line' upheld by the Party's vanguard? In this case the era of reform and opening up may be just another phase in the long history of China's Communist movement and its 'line struggles'. We may yet see either a consolidation of the Party's hold on society and its ideology, or even a new radical phase that could be spurred either by populism or by nationalism. In spite of the unquestionable liberalization of Chinese society, we see in place modernized instruments of control and propaganda and also the sudden appearance of mass campaigns and politics, although today they are more likely to happen over the internet than at the 'struggle meetings'[5] of yesterday. China's spawning

of mass media and entertainment, including political TV shows and debates, does not preclude a large degree of control over the limits of these debates; off-limits behaviour is still met with strong punishment.

Or has it been a resurrection of the 150-year-old process of China's reform and adaptation in front of the West? In this case, the country's present leaders are reformers in the historical sense of the word, placing their steps where figures as diverse as Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, Yan Fu, Zhang Zhidong and Sun Yatsen[6] walked towards the success of reform. In that case we are also seeing a transformation, overt or covert, of the control system and the root ideology of China's sole political party, with plenty of fundamental changes yet to come. There could of course be phases of conservatism or even restoration, which seems to have been the case in China after 1989. But there could also be a constitutionalist movement—one really opting for the separation of Party and state, and in general a separation of powers, as has been hinted at some key moments in the history of the last 30 years.[7] The transition to a market economy could lead to complete empowerment of individuals and private entities: firms, private owners, and in turn NGOs, religious organizations and finally political groups. That prospect is dreaded by Leninists, who believe that the ultimate success of a reform process entails the downfall of the regime that carried it out. They therefore want to reverse course periodically to maintain their overriding priority, that is, overall control of the system. But it has often been the historical horizon of China's reformers. Unlike neo-Confucianists and militarists, they have looked towards the rise of a China that would be more equal with the West, but also more like the West. Debates about property rights, including farmers' rights, about justice and individual rights, and about deregulation and competition, clearly go beyond the framework defined by reformist leaders in the first phase of the reform era (Oi and Walder 1999). At the same time, the above division between 'reformists' and 'reformers' is not an absolute criterion to judge the issue of political liberalization. There have been trends towards political democracy inside Communist parties, including China's, while some of China's historical reformers were unabashed exponents of a strong and even authoritarian state. Sun Yatsen's sense of democracy was much more rooted in regime legitimacy resting on the people at large than in the actual workings of a politically democratic system.[8] Still, the reformers' programmes always rested on a very strong franchise for private interests, while even the most politically liberal reformist leaders have hesitated to genuinely guarantee property rights in the long term. Although we pay a lot of attention to political

reforms, there are liberal elements in China today that claim that the most fundamental structural changes will be achieved through the granting of full economic rights, or from the base to the superstructures, as Marxism would have it. A similar cleavage in the late 1980s separated Zhao Ziyang and his followers, intent on market liberalization if not property rights, from Hu Yaobang, the liberal general-secretary of the Party, who promoted the reform of political processes first.

In judging whether we see in China reformists or reformers, we define the political field differently. Bukharin and Kautsky against Gomulka or Gorbachev, or Lin Zexu and Zhang Zhidong against Yan Fu and Sun Yatsen? 'Continuators' vs. 'liquidators', in the Leninist parlance, or liberal Westernizers vs. nationalist self-strengtheners, as one can sum up many of China's choices in the late nineteenth century? There are very different consequences for our view of China's reform process and of its future, depending on whether we analyse it from the vantage point of the Communist Party, its core tenets and its system of rules, or whether we see it as a much more widely based process of sociological and political transformation. Whether the collective leadership of the CCP passes on its core ethics or DNA, or whether it lets itself be absorbed by succeeding waves of liberalizing reforms, makes a huge difference in our view of present reforms.

Success without a Programme?

International views and analysis of China's reform process in the first years after Mao's 1976 death were generally slow to recognize the reform potential of China's 'third generation' of Communist leaders, led by Deng Xiaoping. He himself was one of the very few representatives of China's 'second generation', having arrived in the inner sanctum of central power after 1949. He had fully participated in the anti-liberal turn of 1957 at the end of the Hundred Flowers before becoming alienated by Mao's handling of the Great Leap Forward. Predictions were also blunted by the probability of recurring cycles of 'line struggle' between radicals and moderates (or red against expert), as they had usually been described in Mao's time. Liberalizing trends and the economic loosening of the system had a very good chance of being just a phase in the PRC's endless shift from right to left, and from left to right. *Fangshou,* the cycle of release and tightening up, was a concept that applied particularly well to fields as diverse as ideology and intellectuals, but also to the management of the economy as a whole. In fact, explanations of

trends by a political economy cycle work wonderfully until the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The best description of China's cyclic politics (Etzioni 1969) relied largely on these concepts. It also added a peculiarly Chinese and Maoist-inspired characteristic. Mao had believed in using the spontaneity of the masses, sparked by political manipulation, to enhance China's dynamism against the bureaucracy. He never hesitated either to rein in brutally any movement he had started when he perceived a regime threat or simply had no use anymore for that movement. China's political cycles were therefore more pronounced and seemingly more irrational than in any Leninist-run system. In sum, Mao's manipulation of the masses had introduced into Chinese politics the irrationality of free agents, much as human instincts and passions are essential to generate a true boom and bust economic cycle.

Therefore, both China's spring of democracy in 1978-79, and the epochal granting of land use rights to individual peasants in 1980-81, just *could* be seen as phases that might be reversed at a later point. In fact, in 1985 and again in 1988-89, China's economy reverted to a more centrally planned stage and each time there were politically conservative arguments making the case for more ideological and Party control. Political scientists were therefore generally slow to recognize that Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues had really moved China from a totalitarian era to—well, to *something else*.

'Transitology', a side-chapel in the cathedral of political science, can bridge the gap between totalitarianism and regime change, because it insists on the transition process itself rather than on its goal posts. Little by little, it simply would transpire that the process was indeed much longer than anybody would have expected and also that the end goals were not that clear, the stated objectives of China's Party-state notwithstanding. In sum, we could be faced with an endless transition. Similarly, an institutional school, abroad and in China, has appeared that argues for incremental and gradual legal and institutional change, for 'imperfect institutions' (North 1990; Oi and Walder 1999)[9] as a realist option, and therefore for a due process that could be achieved without the separation of powers. There are valid arguments from China's Confucianist- and Republican-era traditions that have bequeathed to the PRC notions of personal rule by 'good leaders' (*haoren*) as well as inspection and control mechanisms. There is still also a lot of spin from the Maoist-era practices of 'small democracy' involving petitions, denunciations, the fight against bureaucracy and appeals to above. These practices have remained alive because reformist leaders have turned

the tables on their more conservative and dogmatic competitors, often engineering their fall through purification campaigns.

This could make the case for a uniquely hybrid political regime, one that would combine rule by the Party with checks and balances within the system. This is the 'Singapore hypothesis', bolstered in early 2008 by a Central Party School report. In fact, that solution offers no firm guarantees. And if we adapt this theory to China's participation in international regimes, it is striking that the leading international advocate (Johnston 2008) of an incremental and gradual view of China's integration now recognizes that much of the process of integration could still conceivably be reversed.

If we rest merely on the fact that China is in transition, or if we are satisfied that incremental institutional and legal change equates with basic constitutional change in the end, we therefore explain much of the reform process itself, but not its aims: transition to where? Institutionalization of what? Often cryptic in his pronouncements, because he was no theoretician and disliked Mao and the Party left's bombastic rhetoric, Deng himself encouraged such ambiguity. How else could one explain that he encouraged the framing of post-1978 reforms as defining a period of 50 years before the instauration of socialism, a statement that gave solace to ideologues and abode to reformers? How could one explain that he defined, famously, China's international strategy as a case of 'hiding one's talents and biding for time', a phrase that essentially means: 'We'll tell you later about it'? Deng's ambiguous aphorisms and his flexibility have done wonders to save China from political conflict and to extend the lease of the CCP. But they may return to haunt China. Groping for stones while crossing the river, another of Deng's famous aphorisms, is actually a rationalization of the extraordinary pragmatism, opportunism and caution that have characterized these 30 years. The mixture of uncommon governing competence, personal aloofness and ideological ambiguity evident in Hu Jintao, China's paramount leader today, are another sign that the road ahead is not set. It becomes clear that we have the contrary of what usually happens in reform processes: instead of having a programme without success, we have had success without a programme.

Restating the Fundamental Reform Dilemma

At some time between 1986 and 1989, the observers' consensus began to shift from a vision of another cycle in the history of the CCP's 'line struggle', with incremental reforms subordinated to the Party line, to a

more historical and in fact heroic vision of some of China's leaders as true reformers, potential heralds for a much more fundamental change of society and politics, if not actually regime change. This, ironically, happened as Deng Xiaoping himself had largely reversed his basic stand, siding increasingly with conservatives and planners who were holdovers from the Stalinist economy of the mid-1950s. He then turned against his own political lieutenants who had spearheaded the process of China's 'reform and opening up' from the mid-1970s.

At precisely this moment, debates swelled up and links between intra-party factions and intellectuals outside the Party intensified. A quasi-general turn towards emulating Western institutions and thought happened, leading observers to believe that fundamental change could be afoot. Incremental and piecemeal reforms, leaving aside the core political system and institutions, would be followed by the rise of a generation of political reformers, associating open-minded Party leaders and China's post-Cultural revolution wave of angry scholars and resourceful entrepreneurs.

Yet no one should think that Hu Yaobang, then general secretary of the CCP (ousted in January 1987), and Zhao Ziyang (who succeeded him until his downfall after Tiananmen), were crypto-capitalists. Hu's revolutionary and even Maoist credentials are irrefutable, down to his Hunanese peasant origin; Zhao sprang from the core of the Party system, even if he had long given signs of being a clever and non-conformist Communist cadre, and he was a Sichuanese to boot, as Deng was.

Yet how extraordinary, in retrospect, that Deng's two main lieutenants have advocated strongly for a form of political democracy. Hu did so in 1986, promoting the separation of Party and state (against Zhao's better opinion, in fact) and launching the 'Double Hundred Flowers' movement, a call for political liberalization that echoed the 1956 Hundred Flowers: a democracy couched on the surface in Maoist terms, as befitted Hu's personal life story. Zhao clearly equivocated during the Tiananmen events. He was trapped between his long-time experience of using political activists to tear down the fortress of bureaucracy, something he had learned in Guangdong province at the heart of the Cultural Revolution, and plain fear of the party elders and of a violent conflict. In communist tradition, reformists fear conflict much more than their dogmatic opponents, Deng being the exception that proves perhaps he wasn't all that much of a reformist. Zhao may have been right and China is fortunate that the only leaders ready to shed blood were the conservatives, now rallied behind Deng as the Emperor Dowager. The

clear echo of 1898 and the failed Hundred Days reform is there, with Zhao as Prince Guangxu.[10] Today, when a smuggled oral political testimony by Zhao Ziyang, still alive, is published abroad, it is fascinating that we hear him advocating full political democracy as the only way to move China forward in the future.

Both Hu and Zhao were progressives who had been involved in China's most heady revolutionary phases and both men who had been Deng's main lieutenants became quasi-democrats at some point. And interestingly, both men have been spared by their more conservative colleagues, in part because there is now a limit to the degree of political conflict inside the leadership group, but perhaps also because they carried a large emotional and symbolic charge.

Is that charge still with us today? There are echoes of the Party's debates of the 1980s today. The affiliation of many fourth-generation leaders, as evidenced by one perceptive political analyst (Li 2001), to Communist Youth League or Shanghai-based technocratic factions echoes the Hu Yaobang-Li Peng antagonism. President Hu Jintao himself was a graduate of the Youth League group and hopes about his political liberalism have often rested on that observation alone. Premier Wen Jiabao was a close aide to Zhao Ziyang and there is no doubt that his successful media technique of appearing quickly and modestly among his countrymen at times of difficulty (from snowstorms to the Sichuan earthquake) owes much to the legacy of 1989. He has spoken more forcefully of political democracy on some occasions, including a trip to North America.

Constitutional and political debate remains muted in China, but fundamental economic and social debate happens, leaving no doubt that a new generation of experts, thinkers and leaders understands perfectly institutional and legal issues. Internationally, Chinese diplomats and legal experts are renewing the feat of their 1920s Republican-era predecessors, who often relied on competence and 'inexorable legal gradualism' to win their cases (Kirby 1997). Innumerable cases of civil and social protest, movements for farmers' rights, lawyers' organizations and legal activists sprout up in spite of recurring repression. Chinese society, after 30 years of reform and immense successes for government policies in many areas, is everything but immobile. It is also a fundamental reason why Chinese leaders remain so defensive on issues of sovereignty and outside 'interference' in domestic affairs. They, more than anybody else, know how fluid Chinese society really is.

The Argument for a Neo-classical Era

Yet reform has reached a plateau and if one is to make a historical analogy, it is perhaps a successful restoration that is pursued more than anything else in Beijing. There are compelling arguments, also in the face of a global economic crisis that inevitably affects integrated China, why this might be the case. Some of these arguments follow.

First, the dynamics from intra-party line struggle, originally set in motion by Mao's political scheming, may be exhausted. Why should officials from core Party organizations (Youth League or Party School, for instance) be more reformist than economic cadres or experts? If enlightened liberalism or despotism could only be harboured inside the Party's shell at the end of a long totalitarian era, it can be found today in the many meeting places of civil society and avenues for contact with international experience. As the Party succeeds in opening up China while retaining control, it is also clear that its political and intellectual edge over a vibrant society diminishes. We exclude from this view the multiple channels of learning and analysis that leaders employ, making them possibly one of the world's best informed political elites. The thirst for knowledge also implies a fear to fall behind the curve.

Second, legitimization by nationalist pride and a neo-classical political revival are shaping up this long-term restoration perspective. China has interrupted government contacts with Japan, and briefly with Germany, and has recently postponed an EU summit, not to mention an interruption of military to military contacts with the United States after weapon sales to Taiwan. These constitute a very telling reversal of roles from 20 years ago. Instead of looking at the outside world as a mirror that they crave and fear at the same time, Chinese leaders, not yet adopting sanctions, are telling us from time to time, as the Qianlong Emperor wrote to King George III in 1793, that 'there are not many things we need from you'. The aesthetics of the Beijing Olympics ceremony, orchestrated by Zhang Yimou (who has excelled in historical films about the heyday of the Qings), and the Chinese pavilion constructed for the coming 2010 Shanghai Universal Exhibition, are offerings to this neo-classical age, in the tradition of Ming-Qing court aesthetics. We are very, very far from I. M. Pei's transparent and gracile glass spires, which symbolized a cosmopolitan Chinese Bauhaus age. There are limits to arguments based on political aesthetics, but symbols are there to be interpreted, even if they can also be discarded later.

Third, China's extraordinary search and emulation of technologies and institutional tools has led to particular results in two areas that affect our subject: media influence and surveillance techniques. Their combination gives the Party-state, with a much more limited reservoir of political activists than previously (but unlimited access to other resources), a clear edge in remaining ahead of any potential competition. China's media are huge, colourful and entertaining, full of advertising, yet they keep debates within bounds and shape what is considered in China *zhuliu sixiang*, or 'mainstream thought'. Most Chinese viewers are likely to experience freedom and release, while political content is global in coverage, yet tightly scripted. Surveillance—from the internet to crowd control—has made huge progress in the world's largest producer of electronics and computer parts, and with international cooperation, thanks to the fear of terrorism. When we see China's peculiar mix of societal freedom, political control or correctness and Big Brother government, another neo-classical era springs to mind: that of the American mid-1950s, when contemporary mass entertainment exploded, liberty had bounds determined by the Cold War and William H. Whyte wrote *The Organization Man* (1956).

Fourth, global economic trends now argue more for consolidation than for innovation to a cautious leadership. The benefits of a controlled and semi-planned economy, where industry and finance protection is still permissible under China's present WTO status, are evident at this time. All over the world, governments are called back in for at least temporary interventions and more long-lasting regulation. Enthusiasm for free-marketers is dimmed and Chinese reformers heading down that road face more political risk than previously. Still, we think this is the area where China is going to face the most immediate choices. It is going to be challenged by economic partners requiring yet again more openness and a level playing field justified by China's very success. Then, any shift to domestic-based growth will require sudden progress in institutions, management, arbitration and regulation. In a way, China's increasingly externally led growth has avoided many touchy issues on the domestic front.

In the medium term, economic factors, pointing now to retrenchment and consolidation, might point to the need for a new wave of reforms. This would be in line with the history of the reform process since 1978: jumpstarting the economy in 1978, speeding up internationalization in 1984, renewing the opening-up policy in 1991 and reforming for WTO admission in 1999-2001. These have been huge drivers for reforms in all

fields. This time around, however, economic reforms will pose questions of a more fundamental nature to China's institutional and legal system and ultimately to the balance of power inside the country.

Thus, while political reforms have been frustrated and legal and institutional processes trapped under the glass ceiling of the Party's hold on power, economic reforms would be the engine for a further stage of dynamism. They have already given most, if not all Chinese, their best living standards in history and allowed for freedom of choice in nearly all walks of life, save formal rights to organizations.

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NOTES

1 See the Council on Foreign Relations' blog post by Brad Setser of 13 April 2009 for an excellent discussion of the breakdown between official and 'hidden' reserves. Accessed 8 October 2009 from http://blogs.cfr.org/setser/2009/04/13/chinas-reserves-are-still-growing-but-at-a-slower-pace-than-before/.

2 The trade and financial symbiosis between China and the United States has been coined 'Chinamerica' and recently 'Chimerica' by Niall Ferguson.

3 They were enunciated by Deng in a speech on 30 March 1979, at the end of the first Democracy Wall incident. See http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1290.html. Accessed 8 October 2009.

4 Hu Jintao used it 60 times in his speech to the 17th CCP Party Congress in November 2007.

5 Or *douzheng dahui*, meetings who 'struggled' an opponent of the mass line, the verb being used in the transitive form.

6 Lin Zexu faced the British at Canton and became a controversial figure as a patriotic mandarin; Wei Yuan forged a new doctrine of statecraft and external relations based on adaptation and limitation; Yan Fu created the wealth and power catchword that would spread over East Asia; Zhang Zhidong was China's best known modernizer-administrator; Sun Yat-sen achieved regime change in 1911—with much help from the modern part of China's Imperial army.

7 The most intense moment came in May-June 2009, when martial law was proclaimed by the Party authorities. An attempt was made to convene the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's nominal Parliament. The Committee would have had the authority to reverse the martial law order. The meeting could not take place as members, and crucially Wan Li, the president of the NPC, were prevented from attending. In his posthumous memoirs, Zhao Ziyang confirms the story. See Zhao 2009: 33.

8 In 1924 he described China as a 'loose sheet of sand' and pleaded for cohesion against individual liberty as claimed by Europeans. See Nathan 1985: 130.

9 Douglass C. North (1990) created the perspective.

[10] As we write, a Chinese pathological investigation of Guangxu's remains has finally found that the cause of his death in 1908, while under house arrest, was arsenic poisoning.

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