

The Perfect Dictatorship

China in the 21st Century

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Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

© 2016 Hong Kong University Press

ISBN 978-988-8208-93-7 (*Hardback*)

ISBN 978-988-8208-94-4 (*Paperback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Paramount Printing Co., Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

'A new interpretation of the Chinese party-state—shows the advantage that derives from a comparative theorist looking at the Chinese system.'

—**Tony Saich**, Harvard University

'China is a complex country, and there is a range of reasonable interpretations of its political system. Professor Ringen's interpretation is different than my own, but China watchers need to engage with his thought-provoking and carefully argued assessment. If current trends of repression intensify, less pessimistic analysts will need to recognise that Ringen's analysis may have been prescient.'

—**Daniel A. Bell**, Tsinghua University

'Inspirational and trenchant. Stein Ringen's book is a must-read to understand China's politics, economy, ideology and social control, and its adaptability and challenges under the CCP's rule, especially in the 21st century.'

—**Teng Biao**, Harvard Law School and New York University

'Stein Ringen's insights as a prominent political scientist enable a powerful examination of the Chinese state in a penetrating analysis that reaches strong conclusions which some will see as controversial. The book is scholarly, objective, and free from ideological partiality or insider bias. Whether one ultimately wishes to challenge or embrace his findings, the book should be read.'

—**Lina Song**, University of Nottingham

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Preface

This book has been some time in the making. Some main conclusions were reached quite early in the project and have been confirmed in subsequent developments.

I early on found that the workings of the complicated mixed command and market economy have caused an exaggerated view of China's economic strength. There has without question been strong economic growth, and the Chinese economy is obviously a very big one, but China has not advanced economically, and hence in strength generally, to the extent the leaders have boasted and the world has mostly accepted. In part official statistics have overstated growth, and in part weaknesses and costs in the socialist market economy have gone unaccounted. By 2015, accumulated weaknesses in the economy burst through the surface of pretence, manifested in the mid-year stock market crash, and rattled the confidence of the regime, its people, and international markets.

I also found that the political system is better described as harshly dictatorial than as mildly authoritarian. That conclusion I had reached by the time of the last change of leadership, in 2012–13. This leadership has subsequently cracked down upon real and imagined oppositional forces with much brutality. However, I do not think it would be correct to say that Xi Jinping and his allies brought dictatorship back to China. There is a continuity of political dictatorship during economic opening up. What the new leaders have done is to put to effective use the apparatus that was ready for them when they came into office. I think we should be clear and straight in language and that China analysis should be grounded in an undisguised awareness that we are dealing with a dictatorial state.

The regime uses an intricate combination of legitimacy and control to maintain its highly prized stability. It has bought legitimacy with the spreading of economic rewards and by fostering a reputation of effective governance. It has exercised control with the help of propaganda, thought work, and brute repression. However, under Xi Jinping's leadership there has been a shift in the mode of governance. With the pace of economic growth sliding downwards, the regime turned more strongly to the use of controls, as if it lost confidence in its ability to purchase legitimacy. It intensified repression, reverted to Maoist traditions of propaganda and political education,

streamlined and centralised the structures of power, and extended the role of the party. It scaled back collective leadership for a new kind of one-person rule, complete with a touch of person cult around the supreme leader. It brought ideology back in more strongly than at any time since Mao, albeit a new brand of ideology, under Xi's label of a nationalistic China Dream. This shift has happened step by step but systematically enough to establish the Xi regime as radically different from that of Deng Xiaoping and his followers.

The present Chinese regime, then, in my interpretation, is less strong, more dictatorial, and more of its own kind than the world has mostly wanted to believe.

I started this reflection by thinking that I would probably find in China much of what I had seen previously in South Korea, only writ large.¹ It has been a journey of surprise, and I have not at all found what I expected.

I have found the reading of China less difficult than I had thought. In much of what is written about China, the country and people continue to be seen as inscrutable and mysterious. The Chinese claim to be a uniquely ancient civilisation, and those who look in from the outside sometimes buy into their host's mythology. Non-Chinese writers bring tribute by underlining how very foreign, for them, China is and how difficult it is to understand. It's a big country, and for that reason a complicated one, not least in its governance, but inscrutable it is not. What for me makes China fascinating is less its history than how very different from anything else known to humankind its system is *today*.

Much is also in admiration of China and of its model of development. I had expected to fall into that fold. China's development is indeed impressive. I am not squeamish about authoritarianism, having seen effective governance in the hands of autocratic rulers in South Korea and in the main lauded that form of rule as progressive for the Korean people. But as I have worked along, not only has that expectation been dashed but also my interpretation of the Chinese case has become ever darker. The Chinese party-state is different from any other kind of state. The dictatorship is relentless, determined, and unforgiving, sophisticated in how it does it but uncompromising in what it does. The fact of dictatorship tends to be skirted over a bit, and there is a tendency to play it down by resorting to the more moderate language of 'authoritarianism'. But I have seen authoritarianism at work elsewhere, and what I am seeing in China is different. The state of rule is hard, and, confounding Western expectations, the direction of rule is not towards the softer.

The job I found myself having taken on with this book was to get inside and dissect a system that is unlike any other, a dictatorship that works to perfection, so well that it in some ways does not even look dictatorial, and a dictatorship that grows harder

1. In Ringen et al., *The Korean State*.

within a setting of economic progress. This is counterintuitive for someone like me, with a background in democracy analysis. Dictatorships are supposed to be crude; the Chinese one is not. Economic progress is supposed to make dictatorship less necessary; that is not the way it is seen in China.

I am grateful to colleagues and friends in China who have helped and guided me with much generosity and forbearance. I have relied on many of them for information, in everything from the big questions to tedious and technical details. I have met officials, central and local, and have always been received with generosity. I have met many students at lectures and seminars and have benefitted greatly from stimulating and enlightening discussions with them. Chinese governance is a convoluted business, and there are no doubt remaining mistakes in my descriptions. There are fewer mistakes than there would have been without help from Chinese friends and contacts. Those that remain are entirely my own responsibility.

My conclusions have become critical of the Chinese model, in the end very critical, so much so that I think it is not necessarily in the interest of Chinese friends that I associate them with this book. Some I have not maintained contact with, and I know that some think I have turned my back on them, something I deeply regret and for which I here apologise to those concerned. I would have liked to thank helpers by name but have decided not to. It is not that I believe any single book matters that much. But things are hard in China now. A man or a woman who has entertained a critical outsider might find himself or herself in difficulty with some authority, of which there are many that are able to cause trouble whether they have reason to or not, and in that case even an innocent association with a foreign work, even if itself not very significant, might become another weapon in the hands of another villain.

I do not name Chinese friends and colleagues, nor do I name non-Chinese ones. There are many who have helped with ideas, perspectives, criticism, and inspiration, and I thank all who have engaged in exchange and discussion.

I am grateful to St Antony's College and its Centre for Asian Studies for giving this project a home and to colleagues there and in the splendid wider community of China studies at the University of Oxford for support and encouragement in many ways.

At Hong Kong University Press, I am grateful to my acquisitions editor, Yuet Sang Leung, and publisher, Malcolm Litchfield, for their warm encouragement and support for the project, to Sherlon Ip and Carol Zhong for their firm hand in the copyediting and production of the book, and to Winnie Chau, Jenifer Lim, and Felix Cheung for their engagement, from a very early stage, for its promotion.

Introduction

A Good Regime?

In a retrospective on the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell, master wordsmith, and a volunteer in a faction on the republican side, said that what had been at stake, as he saw it, was ‘the cause of the common people’. My question in this book is whether the reformed Chinese state is doing the common people’s work. It should be: It calls itself a people’s republic and the leaders boast that they are. But is it and are they?

It is not impossible that the Chinese state is on its way to becoming a good regime of its own kind. Many outside observers have come to accept that it is.¹ Inside believers are not naïve. They know of the regime’s blemishes but will argue that it deals with the problems and that people are better off. They may compare it with India, the other big Asian nation, which is democratic but where governance has not delivered, and people have suffered for it.

I will take it as a serious proposition that the Chinese model is special in such a way that it is indeed serving the cause of the common people. In 2012, with the new leadership, the People’s Republic moved into a new phase of its historical march. It is possible that the previous phase, that of Deng Xiaoping and his disciples, was an interim in which the Chinese house was put in order and that the new phase, that of Xi Jinping, is about building on that order for the benefit of the Chinese people.

If they are doing the people’s work, they are doing it in their own way. Their institutions have ‘Chinese characteristics’. When they claim to be democratic, or a market economy, or a rule-of-law system, they add ‘with Chinese characteristics.’² The Chinese system has been and is different from any other. It has to be understood on its own terms and not, for example, as a soviet regime that has miraculously survived or as a new member of the family of capitalist nations. There is a deep-rooted misunderstanding outside of China that as the country grows economically it will also become ‘normal’ socially and politically, meaning, from a Western, capitalistic, democratic vantage, more like us. But China is not and is not becoming ordinary; it is and will remain *different*. Under the new leadership, which has radically changed

1. A recent sophisticated, if critical, voice for this interpretation is Bell, *The China Model*.

2. In a speech about multiculturalism and minority rights to UNESCO in Paris in early 2014, Xi Jinping even embraced ‘Buddhism with Chinese characteristics’.

both the substance and forms of governance, China is now even different from its own previous reformed self.

China is the country and empire that sits on the territory over which the rulers in Beijing claim control. It is an empire in that it embraces vast non-Chinese lands, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and parts of Mongolia (although the notions of 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' thus used are ambiguous). It is a country in the sense that the whole empire is contained within one set of borders. It is a nation with a long history and a strong awareness of its own greatness. Always, the governing of China is a national project, one of national greatness.

China today is almost as big as the empire has ever been. The Qing dynasty in the 18th century claimed more territory, including all of Mongolia and swathes of Kazakhstan and south and east Russia, and Korea and Vietnam as vassal states. Central control is possibly stronger than ever but is still, as it has always been, tenuous. Beijing may be able to hold the country together but is far from directing developments in the provinces. The country is not only big but also diverse, the regions vastly different from one another in development, economy, tradition, culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and in many other ways.

This is the rising power in the world: big, bureaucratic, undergoing ferocious economic growth, assertive, much admired, and much feared. It is the ultimate state-led country, the country as strong as the state is strong. How and where is this state leading its country?

To know a state—what kind it is, what it is about—we need to dissect what its leaders say, how the machinery of government is built up, how they work it, and what comes out of it. All regimes must present themselves to their people and to the world and explain and justify their hold on and use of power. To be obeyed at home and respected abroad, the leaders need a narrative to help them attract that obedience and respect. An effective regime must then have the capacity to act. It must have a machinery through which intentions can be translated into doings. How the leaders are able to do that is determined in part by the shape of the administration at their disposal. But since leaders differ in how well they are able to use their bureaucracies, we do not finally know a state until we can see how intentions and actions flow through to consequences out there among the people, in society, and in the world.

China will never be a beautiful utopia, but it could be on the way to making itself as benevolent an autocracy as is possible in the Chinese context, given the country's history and contemporary complexity. It could be making itself a regime that is progressive for the Chinese people and that presents itself to them, at this time in their history, as the best they could realistically have.

While pondering this question, a second one emerges—a question about ideology. Since Deng Xiaoping, the great modern reformer, the Chinese leaders have been seen to have worked pragmatically and unburdened by ideology. But as I try to get inside

this state, the question puts itself in front of me of whether it might look pragmatic but still be ideological. It was an ideological state in Mao's time. Has it now shed ideology, or is it remaking itself into a new ideological state on non-Maoist terms? As there is no understanding of the Chinese state other than as a party-state, there may be no good understanding of the party-state that does not include ideology.

Two questions stand against each other. In which way is China leaning, towards a permanently pragmatic state, or towards a new version of its original self, an ideological state? The tug of war between these two views underlies the following discussions to the end, and beyond.

Postscript

A Better Regime?

As the Chinese leaders are haunted by ghosts from their past, so are some China watchers, myself included. My ghost is the sometimes inability of outsiders to recognise totalitarian regimes for what they were until too late. Even Nazi Germany was widely respected until it took Europe and the world to war. We do not like to remember it today, but this respect was strongly present in all the countries that subsequently fought Germany, including among intellectuals. That admiration survived astonishing odds: the ever more vile, brutal, and racist dictatorship, the ranting madness of Hitler whenever he spoke. Many observers of the Soviet Union saw there a credible alternative to democracy, and way into and beyond the Stalinist period a regime that was in many ways superior, sometimes morally superior. This admiration again survived what should have made it impossible: collectivisation and famine, political murder as an instrument of rule, the pact of collaboration with Hitler to annex parts of Poland and the Baltic states, the gulag, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Even when I was a student in the 1970s, in, of all places the University of Oslo in Norway, it was good teaching that the East European regimes, East Germany in particular, were in many ways superior to our own systems.

Today, it is the People's Republic of China that attracts admiration, an admiration that again has survived adversity: the brutality of Maoist dictatorship and its catastrophic consequences, the failure at the junction after Mao to choose the route of political opening up, the resort to political murder in 1989. Philosophers praise China as a civilisation state. Business people around the world, and academics, are falling over each other to get in on the China act. China is of course far from universally admired, as also previous totalitarian systems were not, but it is as if some have a need to see the regime as more benevolent than it is. In the 1980s, the world failed to listen to Deng and chose to believe he was moving China in a liberal direction. But he never said he would and never did. When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the man the world again thought would be a reformer instead lurched to the Maoist left, tightened all the screws of dictatorship, and turned to an ideology of aggressive nationalism. Against the odds, both inside and outside of China, people persist in believing and

expecting that China is moving towards a more socially and politically open society, in what was once, hopefully, called a 'slow-motion revolution'.¹

Two fallacies are behind these inabilities. One is an uncritical admiration of delivery, in particular delivery by autocratic order and strength. While the Soviet Union looked its strongest, and while Maoist China looked to be the vanguard of world revolution, the democratic world was immersed in self-doubt. The force and determination of authoritarianism looked good because the alternative looked bad. This caused many observers both to admire the dictatorial regimes for their prowess and to disregard or downplay the human costs behind their delivery. It also caused them to overestimate what was actually delivered. The Soviet regime in fact never delivered although for a while it looked as if it did. It kept a state economy afloat on the backs of a population that was exploited and kept in poverty. The true story of Maoist China was not delivery but destruction. Now the reformed economy is said to be on the way to becoming the world's largest, a story told by prettied-up statistics and repetition.

The other fallacy is ideological. Both the Soviet Union and Maoist China used the weapon of ideology to great effect. They offered the world belief systems that promised paradise once the struggle was won, and many outsiders bought into those powerful narratives, some fully and some to a great degree. Those who did made themselves disposed to seeing the good in the regimes they admired and to excusing the ugliness as necessary sacrifices now for the greater good tomorrow.

In the case of contemporary China, there is also the size factor. China is big and strong, not least economically. It is opportune to make oneself believe that a regime one has to deal with and with which there are many benefits to being on good terms is a laudable regime, or at least another regime among regimes.

But China is *different*. Its state is different—a party-state; its polity is different—a controcracy; its economy is different—a socialist market economy. The complacent view that contemporary China is just a regime that happens to be economically successful and effective in delivery is to not take China as it is seriously. If it was a plausible hope after the dawn of reform and opening up that China would open up politically, that hope has subsequently been extinguished, most recently under the Xi Jinping leadership that has consolidated the dictatorial regime. On this, there can now be no doubt; the question is only how radical that consolidation will be.

The journalist Evan Osnos, on leaving China in 2013 after years as a correspondent for the *New Yorker*, drew his experiences together in a book entitled *Age of Ambition*. That is an appropriate title. China is rising, the leaders are assertive, neighbours and others are uneasy. But just how ambitious is the Chinese state and, as the leaders look forward, what is the nature of their ambition?

1. Johnson, *Wild Grass*.

We cannot know. The model may or may not be at a watershed. Those who previously have been most eager to predict have more often than not got it wrong. The best I can do is to suggest some possible scenarios and speculate on their probabilities.

Scenario 1: Steady on. The reformist continuity may persist. The economy may continue to grow, at least enough. The state may continue to be in control, at least enough. There may be the familiar path of step-by-step administrative reform. There may be continued collective leadership. The socialist market economy may be twigged as necessary. The population may stay reasonably compliant. The rest of the world may continue to engage. China may avoid international adventurism and pull back from the brink of confrontation with neighbours. The leaders may continue to value stability above all. If they can rely less on legitimacy, they have the means and will to deploy more severe controls, as we have seen in the last two or three years. The regime has done well from reform and opening up, and the leaders may not want to put at risk what has been gained. They may remain cautious and hold ambition under control.

I classify this as a high-probability scenario. China has muddled through for years and continued muddling-through might be the regime's best bet. The new leadership may turn out to be less ambitious than it first made itself look and may, as have previous leaders, settle down to doing what is necessary rather than what might be desirable. The shock of the stock market crash in 2015 may shift the pendulum of economic management back from marketisation towards more control.

However, in the final process of completing this book, and as our understanding of the new leadership is improving, I have come to think of this scenario as a bit less than high probability. Xi Jinping has gathered unprecedented, since Mao, powers in his own hands and is presenting himself as an ambitious and activist leader who may not have in mind a legacy of simply having kept the ship on steady keel. It seems he might be a man with a mission, and if so he may have concentrated enough power in his hands to pursue it and may be determined or trapped into imposing his own will to the bitter end.

Scenario 2: Demise. Although much seems to suggest that the economy will continue to grow and that the controlocracy will persist and improve, the much-lauded stability rests on many a fine balance. There is no end to what could go wrong. Contradictions in the socialist market economy may not continue to be manageable. Growth may not only slow but stop. The oligarchic class may continue to rob a state that can no longer afford to be robbed. The bubble of debt-infused investment may burst, as the stock market part of it did in 2015. Too many of those who can may leave for the free world and take too much money with them. Latent conflicts in the leadership may not be suppressed. Xi may be seen as an emperor in the making and find colleagues turning on him—or he may succeed in making himself supreme, suspend collective

leadership and, like Mao, steer the party-state off the rails. He may prove to be a true believer in the purity of the party and drive his effort to clean it up to ultimate and self-defeating collapse. The military could intervene. The anti-corruption campaign may backfire and bring on administrative paralysis. Social forces may assert themselves. The new economic and intellectual middle classes may not remain content to obey, nor students, nor journalists. Internet control could break. Ethnic minorities may revolt. Democracy contagion from Taiwan and Hong Kong may not be containable. Neighbouring countries may collaborate in alliance. Foreign powers could take on China. War could break out.

All this and more is possible—but I do not classify this as a high-probability scenario, although the crash of 2015 must be taken as evidence that stability is fragile. Still, contrary to the view that the Chinese model is riven by contradictions and cannot hold, I have concluded that the party-state is one of high capacity. It is effective in administration and control. It is fiscally solid. It is able to reform and adapt, and to deploy more repression as needed. It is more likely that controlocracy holds at home and that rationality prevails abroad. But not certain: Things may get out of hand and much could go wrong.

Scenario 3: Utopia. The regime claims to be on a socialist path and currently in a transition phase of capital accumulation and dictatorship of the proletariat before, when the time is right, it turns to using its accumulated resources and stability for the creating of a socialist utopia of security, harmony, and freedom. That view is written into the party's constitution. Something along these lines could happen. The time may come for equality in the 'growth first equality second' programme. Xi and his associates may succeed in crushing the counter-powers of the oligarchic class. Inequalities could be reined in. The embryonic system of social protection could evolve into a genuine welfare state. Rule by law could evolve into rule of law. Public administration could be made honest and responsive. Corruption could be pushed back to no longer being unbearable in daily life. Core structures of the controlocracy, such as the *hukou* and the birth control policy, could be seriously relaxed or abolished. Civil society, for example, around the emergence of non-official NGOs, could take on force and make itself a partner with the state in a peaceful transition to balanced state-society relations.

This also is possible, but is also, in my judgement, a low probability scenario. Inequalities and divisions on many dimensions are entrenched. There is nothing to suggest that the regime is intent on anything like a serious policy of social protection and justice or that it would be able to embark on that kind of policy even if the leaders wanted to. The war on the oligarchic class might end in a truce when the leaders are content that they have eliminated their opponents within the system, or be long drawn out, brutal, and possibly destructive. The state is not trusted and autonomous

social forces, if allowed to take life, would more likely establish themselves in opposition to the state than in partnership with it. All previous movements towards open and balanced social relations have turned to a demand for democracy, have then been seen as a threat, and have been crushed before having been able to consolidate into any kind of autonomy. The new regime has been determined to fortify the controlocracy and has shown no sign of wishing to relax it.

Scenario 4: Democracy. The leaders also claim that their model is or is on the way to becoming a democracy with Chinese characteristics. Although China today is very much a dictatorship, and looks to remain a dictatorship, the emergence of a democracy of its own kind is not impossible. There is democracy of sorts on the village level which could be a basis for further evolution. There have been experiments with extending democracy up the hierarchy although so far not successful ones. China has proved to be a pressure cooker in which the desire for democracy has been brewing and the democratic aspiration is without doubt alive in the population. America invented a new kind of democracy in its day; China could do the same now.

A possible trajectory could be to make village democracy real by allowing genuinely competitive elections, then extending local democracy to urban areas, and then building upwards with a system of indirect elections so that officials on any level are elected competitively by and among lower-level officials.² That would create a structure within existing state institutions in which officials would answer downwards, ultimately to the lowest level of directly elected officials, very different from the current system where officials answer upwards. The common people would have a say, and a feeling of say, in public affairs. Theoretically, one could imagine this implemented in both the state and in the party so that the party apparatus could be maintained within a framework of democratic indirect elections.

The method of indirect elections has not had much attention in recent democratic theory, a sign perhaps of resistance among political scientists against thinking of other kinds of democracy than the now conventional model, and might be underestimated as a way of solving the problem of scale in so large a country as China.

But, although something like this may not be impossible, no one with insight into the Chinese system would be likely to take this as a scenario with much probability. What China has reinvented is dictatorship, not democracy. If there is one thing there seems to be solid agreement about at the top, it is that anything that resembles real democracy is a danger to that all-important stability and not permissible given the regime's determination to self-preserve.

2. In *The China Model*, Bell suggests that democracy at the local level could be enough to secure the regime genuine legitimacy, provided the rest of the system was made effective and honest with the help of a well-functioning and open 'meritocratic' system for the selection and promotion of leaders.

Scenario 5: The perfect fascist state. Following on from my discussion under ‘the power hypothesis’ in Chapter 2, the leadership could cast caution aside, embrace ambition, and reconstitute China as an ideological power state. Deng advised the country to ‘hide its capacities and bide its time’. Perhaps the time is coming to step out of that restraint.

The architecture of a power state is there: the party-state structure, the unity of party and military, the bureaucracy of propaganda and control, the omnipresent security forces. Under the post-2012 leadership, the pendulum of governance has swung from trust in its ability to purchase legitimacy towards more reliance on its capacity to control. Central political command is being strengthened. The top leader is concentrating power to himself. Business and civil society are co-opted into corporatist institutions under party guidance. Censorship and stability management is being tightened. Propaganda, political education, and thought work is being made more assertive. Mass-line campaigns and mass organisation work are back in pride and use. The top leader is giving himself a patina of person cult and making his power felt. He is admonishing cadres to ‘make work in the ideological sphere a high priority in your daily agenda’ and to ‘embrace the spirit of Mao Zedong’. One day he convenes authors and artists and instructs them about the duty of cultural workers to serve the nation and party. One day he lectures architects to steer away from the design of ‘weird buildings’, and one day think-tanks to heed party guidance in their work. And one day a leading paper publishes an article about his busy workday which starts before breakfast with clearing away the paperwork that has come in after midnight and ends late in the evening when he ‘finds happiness in exhaustion.’³ His works and thoughts are being published in multivolume editions and in many languages. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is organising a massive programme of multiple research projects on Xi Jinping thought. In April 2015, an app was launched, created at the Central Party School, with Xi Jinping’s remarks and works, immediately branded ‘the little red app’ by netizens. On 23 September 2015, the *People’s Daily* released a (frankly nauseating) Youtube clip, part of a series, called ‘Who Is Xi Dada?’ with foreign students praising the great man, in everything from strength and wisdom to concern and charm.

I have concluded that the Chinese controlocracy is the perfect dictatorship. It does not depend on commanding most people in their daily lives and is able to mostly rely on their acquiescence and self-censorship. But behind that façade of softness is the hard reality of as perfect control as is possible when control is needed, of ruthlessness, and of a totalitarian system’s care to let its capacity of control and unforgivingness be known to all. Xi Jinping has moved governance away from apparent softness and towards more undisguised hardness.

3. All this was in a four-week period in October–November 2014.

However, a power state needs ideological in addition to administrative grounding. Totalitarian use of state power needs more than the excuse of stability; it needs the justification that comes from higher ideas and principles. A resurrection of classical communist ideology would not be credible. A new power state in China would need a new ideology. That ideology may be in the making in Xi Jinping's China Dream.

It is possible that the China Dream will turn out to be hot air of little substance, as have previous ideology-like signals. Perhaps that it all it is—but it could also become the new narrative for a revived China, a narrative that draws on Chinese history more than on Marxist theory and that goes to nation, nationalism, strength, unity, and patriotism. When Mao declared the People's Republic in 1949, his message was that China had risen again. He slotted the revolution into a tradition of nation and greatness. He got himself lost in a fantasy of revolution, but those who have followed him have reverted to nation building. The unifying idea has been China the great. This may now be in the process of finding its ideological articulation.

The narrative of national greatness has the resonance in Chinese imagination and tradition to make that possible, the resonance that 'harmonious society' failed to find. There are signs that Xi's promotion of it is taking hold. No sooner had he said 'dream' than the whole system swung into action to give his signal content and meaning. Overnight it became the story that party, state, educational, and other agencies and institutions took to as giving purpose and direction to their activities. It became the object of study in the party system at all levels, and in schools, colleges, and universities, and discussed in official media and through the Internet. When the party issued an instruction in early 2015 on strengthening ideological work in higher education, the China Dream was to be at the core of enhanced political training for faculty. Professors and students, it was reported from the late January conference on the implementation of the instruction, 'wholeheartedly support the party's leadership . . . and the great resolve of the Chinese nation through the China Dream.' It is flagged up front on websites of the party, of party affiliates, and of the state system as the idea those wishing to display their loyalty have to pay lip service to. The slogan on the poster in front of government headquarters in Shanghai to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the revolution in 2014 read 'The East Is Red. Chinese Dream.' It was the crescendo with which Premier Li Keqiang concluded his reports on the work of the government to the 2014 and 2015 National People's Congresses.

If the China Dream is ideology, of what kind is it? Xi himself, on its launch, presented it as 'the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in recent times' and 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', and added that 'each person's future and destiny is closely linked with the future and destiny of the country and nation'. The sting is in the tail of this exhortation, is in the idea of unity of nation and person.

Xi presented his dream as a double narrative, not just of nation and greatness but also of a relationship between state and people. That double meaning was quickly

picked up in subsequent interpretations and has constantly been repeated. An early and long first-page article on 5 April 2013 in *Beijing Daily*, the capital's party newspaper, was remarkable:

Use the China Dream to gather consensus and unify strength. . . . Extensively promulgate and realise that the China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is precisely what will strengthen the nation, revive its ethnic groups, and bless its people. . . . Extensively promulgate that the future and destiny of every person is inseparably linked to the future and destiny of the country and the nation. . . . Extensively promulgate that patriotism is the nucleus of the national spirit. . . . Promote patriotism as the soul of a powerful and invigorated country which joins minds and gathers strength, and as the spiritual force which strengthens and unites the Chinese people. . . . Extensively promulgate that realizing the China Dream requires the consolidation of Chinese power. Extensively promulgate that the China Dream is the dream of the nation, and is also the dream of every Chinese person.

This is not just a celebration of national greatness. It is in addition an idea that national greatness and individual happiness are one and the same and inseparable, and conversely that there is no individual happiness without national greatness.

This is a very different idea from what one might think its inspiration, the American Dream. That term was minted by the historian James Truslow Adams in 1931, in his *The Epic of America*. This was a dream of a social order in which every man and woman can realise his or her capabilities to the fullest and be recognised by others as equals. It was a dream of personal aspirations and fairness. The China Dream is a dream of national aspiration and for the nation ahead of the people who make it up. Their aspiration is said to be fulfilled if the national aspiration is fulfilled.

Ideologies are dangerous. What we are seeing in the China Dream is the embryo of an ideology that is ultra-dangerous. It is that because it sits on a rhetoric of power and national greatness and because, ultimately, it is an ideology in which the person ceases to exist as an autonomous being and is subsumed in the nation. If individual happiness comes from national greatness, then the pursuit of national greatness is an undivided good. If national greatness is the making of individual happiness—because the destiny of every person is inseparably linked to the destiny of the nation—then there is no autonomous good for individual women and men that might restrain the national project or the policies of the party-state that is the custodian of that project. There is no independent good of persons that can stand in the way of and limit what is seen as the good of the nation or the strength of its state. If repression, aggression, and ultimately war are in the national interest, then these policies are by ideological fiat also for the good of 'each person's future and destiny'.

At its core, the idea of unity between nation and person is a fascist idea, *the* fascist idea. Even communist ideology (if of course not practice) has been built in the enlightenment spirit that persons are objectives and that systems are for their

good, and that they prove themselves by promoting the good of individual women and men. The final horror of fascist ideology as it arose in Europe was its rejection of enlightenment modernity by the elimination of individual autonomy. Governments are to serve the cause of national greatness, nation and people are one, national greatness is for the good of the people, there is no other way that persons can prosper than that their nation prospers. Ultimately, if war is in the national interest, it is for the good of the persons who are the building blocks of the nation. This is not abstract theorising. In fascist Europe there was no limit to repression, no limit to aggression, no limit to evil, no limit to political murder, and no limit to sacrifice that was not for the good of the people. It was by this ideology that European fascism was able to worship war as an arena of national glory and a cleansing experience for a people.

The new Chinese state has been described elsewhere as fascist. For example, Yu Jie, the author of *Xi Jinping: China's Godfather* (a critical biography published in Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong) has in interviews described the regime as fascist for being aggressive, nationalistic, and militaristic. But that is a misunderstanding. A state is not fascist for being nationalistic; it is fascist if its nationalism is grounded in a fascist ideology. A nationalistic state is one thing, a nationalistic state that eggs itself on by ideology something else.

It is too early to tell. After Mao and until Xi Jinping, the Chinese state was in my schema a trivial one, successful and increasingly strong but with a regime carefully dedicated to self-preservation and ready to accept almost any price for stability. That may endure. The Chinese state is a sophisticated dictatorship but, as things stand today, possibly not yet an ideological one. It is a near-totalitarian regime but not fully totalitarian.

But it is also a regime still in the making. Its present remaking is not a pretty sight. The current leadership has step by step tightened dictatorial controls. The year 2015 was a bad one for them. It hit home, domestically and abroad, that economic growth is on a downwards slide. The stock market crash, the decline in the value of the currency, a deadly explosion (death toll: 173, hundreds more injured) in a chemical warehouse in Tianjin that was not an accident but the result of rules having been flaunted through political corruption—all this conspired to undermine the credibility of a regime that has built its clam to legitimacy on safe management and economic performance. The logic is convoluted. There is more dictatorship, hence more need for justification. There is less justification to be found in the legitimacy of good governance, therefore yet more reliance on controls. Its reputation for steady economic management in shatters, the regime must turn elsewhere for justification, to narrative and ideology. Hence the increasing prominence of propaganda, political education, and mass campaigns, and the new rhetoric of national greatness, nationalism, and chauvinism, and the super-rhetoric of the China Dream.

The leaders now speak a new and assertive ideological language, and it is, as usual, unwise not to listen to what they say. When powerful leaders turn to ideology, there is *always* danger and others *must* pay attention. Theirs could be a state that has risen so that it is no longer possible for it to bide its time. Economic growth may not be narrative enough when the real underlying project is national greatness. The party-state and its controlocracy may no longer have *raison d'être* enough without more forceful ideological justification. Ideology is in the remaking and might become inevitable. The balance could tip to fully fledged totalitarianism. It could be that China is rising not only economically but irresistibly also as a power state.

For all we know, Xi Jinping may not deliberately be embracing ideology at all and may just be experimenting with slogans that work. But to play with ideology is to play with fire and he may, even if inadvertently, be releasing a force that is not only strong but also repugnant and that takes on a life of its own and becomes its author's master on terms the author may not have fully anticipated. A big and powerful country, a strong state, an ambitious and shrewd leader—that adds up to a force to be reckoned with. A big and powerful country, a strong state, an ambitious and shrewd leader, a commanding ideology—that adds up to a force to be feared.

This, in my judgement, is a second high-probability scenario. If the Chinese state is to be a power state it must be ideological. There seems to be no other serviceable ideology in the offering than one with fascistoid characteristics. The tug of war between my two high-probability scenarios comes down to ideology. If the Chinese state continues to operate as a custodian of economic growth and political control, and does so effectively, it is likely to remain dictatorial but pragmatic. If it becomes dependent on ideology and embraces a narrative in which persons are subsumed in the nation, it will have made itself a totalitarian state of the most sinister kind, the kind in which persons are only 'the masses' and do not matter individually. An ideological strong state is by historical experience dangerous. If it takes to basking in a story of its own making of national glory, pragmatism is unlikely to prevail, and no one can tell what might follow. As I have been following the sayings and doings of the new leadership and have come to thinking of my first scenario as high probability minus, my instinct on completing this exploration is to classify my final scenario as high probability plus.

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