The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China

In the 1990s China embarked on a series of political reforms intended to increase, however modestly, political participation to reduce the abuse of power by local officials. Although there was initial progress, these reforms have largely stalled and, in many cases, gone backward. If there were sufficient incentives to inaugurate reform, why wasn’t there enough momentum to continue and deepen them? This book approaches this question by looking at a number of promising reforms and understanding the incentives of officials at different levels and the way the Chinese Communist Party operates at the local level. The short answer is that the sort of reforms necessary to make local officials more responsible to the citizens they govern cut too deeply into the organizational structure of the party.

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Abbreviations

CCP  Chinese Communist Party
CDIC Central Discipline Inspection Commission
CPPCC Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference
CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union
FIC Federation of Industry and Commerce
HRS Household Responsibility System
MCA Ministry of Civil Affairs
MOFTEC Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation
NGO nongovernment organization
NPC National People’s Congress
PRC People’s Republic of China
Acknowledgments

This project started six years ago when I was a scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies in Washington, D.C., where I enjoyed the hospitality of Lee Hamilton and Robert Hathaway and learned from my colleagues. At the time, I thought it probable that political reform in China would follow, albeit with a lag, the course of economic reform – gradual moves that would, over time, increase political participation and create institutions that would constrain the behavior of local officials. Greater liberalization of the system seemed a real possibility, and the various experiments unfolding in political reform suggested that the central government supported such reforms and that there were real interests at the local level for doing so. So I began to search out examples of what appeared to be the most promising examples of reform. The China Leadership Monitor, an online journal that I have been fortunate enough to be involved with since its inception, provided a terrific platform for trying out my ideas. The Smith Richardson Foundation has generously supported the China Leadership Monitor over the years, and I am happy to acknowledge their support.

Procrastination is rarely seen as a virtue, but, in the case of this project, watching the evolution of Chinese reform over the past six years has not only led me to a deeper appreciation of the dynamics of reform but also forced me to pay closer attention...
to the sustainability of reform efforts at the local level. That is
to say, although the creation of new and effective institutions
seemed possible when I started this project, time has suggested
that reforms that seemed likely to lead to new institutions and
more predictable government have withered as time has passed.
Innovation is one thing; institutionalization another.

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