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.

Joseph Fewsmith is Professor of International Relations and Political Science at Boston University. He is the author of *China Since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao* (2008), which is the second edition of *China Since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (2001); *Elite Politics in Contemporary China* (2001); *The Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (1994); and *Party, State, and Local Elites in Republican China: Merchant Organizations and Politics in Shanghai, 1980–1930* (1985). He is the editor of *China Today, China Tomorrow* (2010) and co-editor, with Zheng Yongnian, of *China’s Opening Society* (2008). He is very active in the China field, traveling to China frequently and presenting papers at professional conferences such as the Association for Asian Studies and the American Political Science Association. His articles have appeared in such journals as *The China Quarterly, Asian Survey, The Journal of Contemporary China, Modern China,* and *Comparative Studies in Society and History.* He is one of seven regular contributors to *China Leadership Monitor,* a quarterly Web publication analyzing current developments in China. He is also an associate of the John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies at Harvard University and of the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer Range Future at Boston University.
The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China

JOSEPH FEWSMITH

Boston University
# Contents

*Figures and Maps*  
*Abbreviations*  
*Acknowledgments*  
*Introduction*  
1. The Problem of Governance in China  
2. Bottom-Up Reform versus Top-Down Development  
3. Inner-Party Democracy  
4. Wenzhou: Social Capital without Civil Society  
5. Consultative Authoritarianism: The Wenling Model  
   - Conclusion  
*Glossary*  
*Bibliography*  
*Index*
Figures and Maps

Figures

1. Public Security building in Weng’an page 21
2. Bridge across Shuanghekou 48
3. Broad streets in Suqian 56
4. Wenzhou General Chamber of Commerce 119
5. Discussing the budget in Wenling 152

Maps

1. China, with provinces of Sichuan and Zhejiang highlighted 13
2. Chongqing municipality, indicating location of Maliu township 43
3. Sichuan province, indicating locations of Bazhong city, capital Chengdu, Pingchang county, Suining city, Buyun town, and Ya’an city 76
4. Zhejiang province, indicating locations of Wenzhou, Taizhou, and the capital, Hangzhou 112
Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDIC</td>
<td>Central Discipline Inspection Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPPCC</td>
<td>Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPSU</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Soviet Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIC</td>
<td>Federation of Industry and Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRS</td>
<td>Household Responsibility System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Ministry of Civil Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOFTEC</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>nongovernment organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>National People’s Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

In trying to understand the dynamics of reform, why institutions are created, and how they are sustained, if they are, I have put myself in debt to many people, many of whom may have views different from those I have come to hold. In all cases, however, they have been generous in sharing their insights. So it is with great gratitude that I thank Cai Dingjian (whose passing in 2010 caused much sadness), Chen Shengyong, Chen Yimin, Gregory Chin, Clifford Edmunds, Fang Ning, Feng Yue, Bernie Frolic, Han Fuguo, Gao Xiang, Gao Xinjun, Guo Dan, Guo Xiaoming, He Junzhi, He Zengke, Hu Wei, Jia Xijin, Jiang Hua, Jiang Zhaohua, Jing Yuejin, Lai Hairong, Lang Youxing, Charlotte Lee, Cheng Li, Li Fan, Liu Yawei, Ma Jun, Alice L. Miller, Carl Minzner, Mo Yifei, Niu Meili, Jean Oi, Pan Wei, Elizabeth J. Perry, Qin Hui, Shi Weimin, Bernard Silverman, Tang Tsou, Wang Changjiang, Wang Guoqin, Wang Jian, Wang Jingyao, Wang Xiaodong, Wang Zhenyao, Robert P. Weller, Yang Fan, Yang Xuedong, Yu Jianrong, Yu Jianxing, Yu Keping, Yu Xunda, Xiang Jiquan, Xiao Gongqin, Xu Xianglin, Xu Yong, Zhang Xueming, Zhao Wenmian, Zheng Yongnian, Zhou Meiyuan, Zhou Yi, and many others.

The ideas presented in this book were developed not only through observation, reading, and discussion but also by presenting my views at talks at Middlebury College, Benedictine College, Kings College, the China Law Center at Yale University, the Harvard Yenching Institute at Harvard University, the Fairbank Center at Harvard University, and Stanford University. I appreciate the opportunity to exchange ideas with those who attended and challenged me to think more deeply.

Finally, I want to thank Nancy Hearst of the H. C. Fung Library at Harvard University for her careful editing, making my prose smoother than it is naturally, cutting out redundancies and
Acknowledgments

inconsistencies, and ensuring accuracy. Lewis Bateman, Mark Fox, Stephanie Sakson, and Shaun Vigil at Cambridge University Press have made the publication a smooth and enjoyable process. I am deeply grateful to all those who have helped me better understand the reform process in China and those who have made my presentation of my findings more understandable, but, alas, the errors that remain are my responsibility alone.

J. F.