

## Institutional Genes

This book explores the origins and evolution of China's institutions and communist totalitarianism in general. Contemporary China's fundamental institution is communist totalitarianism. Introducing the concept of "institutional genes," the book examines how the institutional genes of Soviet Russia merged with those of the Chinese imperial system, creating a durable totalitarian regime with Chinese characteristics – Regionally Administered Totalitarianism. Institutional Genes are fundamental institutional elements that self-replicate and guide institutional changes and are empirically identifiable. By analyzing the origins and evolution of institutional genes in communist totalitarianism from Europe and Russia, as well as those from the Chinese Empire, the Chinese Communist Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and post-Mao reforms, the book elucidates the rise and progression of communist totalitarianism in China. The ascent of communist China echoes Mises' warning that efforts to halt totalitarianism have failed. Reversing this trend necessitates a thorough understanding of totalitarianism.

CHENGGANG XU is Senior Research Scholar at the Stanford Center on China's Economy and Institutions, Stanford University, a board member of the Ronald Coase Institute, and Research Fellow at the Center for Economic and Policy Research. He was the Chung Hon-Dak Professor of Economics at the University of Hong Kong, Special-Term Professor at Tsinghua University, the World-Class University Professor at Seoul National University, and Associate Professor at the London School of Economics. He also served as President of the Asian Law and Economics Association. He obtained his PhD in economics from Harvard University in 1991. Chenggang Xu was a recipient of the 2013 Sun Yefang Prize and the 2016 Chinese Economics Prize.

“Why did China become a totalitarian nation? What is the connection between Chinese communism and that in the Soviet Union, and what accounts for their differences? How might we expect the Chinese Communist Party to evolve in the future? Chenggang Xu gives fascinating answers to all these questions and many more in this bold but carefully argued book that is deeply rooted in historical and economic analysis.”

*Eric S. Maskin, Adams University Professor and Professor of Economics and Mathematics, Harvard University; co-recipient of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (2007)*

“Why does democracy flourish in some countries but not others? Many people expected that China’s meteoric rise would lead to the embrace of democracy, but this has not happened. Chenggang Xu’s fascinating book argues that the reason is China’s imperial tradition and the acceptance of limits on individual freedom and property rights, what he calls institutional genes. Engaging with the greatest thinkers, Xu applies the same idea to explain the growth of democracy in the West, but not in Russia. This is a must-read for anyone interested in arguably the most important issue of our time.”

*Olivier Hart, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor, Harvard University; co-recipient of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (2016)*

“We hear much about China’s innovativeness, its state capitalism, its market system, or its modernization. This thought-provoking book argues otherwise. It documents through historical, institutional and economic analysis that China’s political and economic system is still totalitarian, despite the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Xu argues that communist rule changes not only institutions but many important aspects of culture in a highly persistent manner, and the Chinese system today cannot be understood without its ‘totalitarian institutional genes,’ which have shaped the current Chinese economy, social life and Communist Party rule. This is a must-read book for anybody interested in China and the complex world order that is emerging today.”

*Daron Acemoglu, Institute Professor, MIT Economics; co-recipient of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (2024)*

“With unblinking focus, Chenggang Xu picks apart the historical and institutional genes of totalitarianism in modern China. He illuminates a new understanding of how China’s governance developed from its roots in Imperial China and Russian Bolshevism. Instantly, this masterpiece of historical and political-economic analysis becomes the definitive reference to which anyone concerned with China’s political system must turn. Will constitutional freedoms have a chance in China? You must read this book.”

*Darrell Duffie, Adams Distinguished Professor of Management and Professor of Finance, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University*

“Chenggang Xu, the famous economist who, among others, wrote the classical paper on the institutions underlying China’s growth miracle, now delivers what will likely be seen as the definitive analysis of the institutional roots of China’s ‘regionally administered totalitarianism.’ Xu brilliantly analyzes China’s failure to introduce constitutional rule in the 20th century, using history and the influence of the Russian revolution. China’s millennial imperial system was much more autocratic than absolutist monarchies. This facilitated the import and adaptation of Bolshevik institutions, creating China’s unique form of totalitarianism. A deep and extremely thoughtful analysis that is key to understanding contemporary China.”

*Gerard Roland, E. Morris Cox Distinguished Professor of Economics and Professor of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley*

“The largest living thing in the world is not a whale but a huge and little-noticed subterranean fungus called *Armillaria ostoyae*. Similarly, the largest political organism, as Chenggang Xu shows in this startling and important book, is a communist totalitarianism whose ‘institutional genes’ recur at different times and places but are always determinative. Pretty words disguise merciless violence, human beings are reduced to roles, and it is the system, not its captives, that enjoys autonomy. But Xu is no starry-eyed conspiracy theorist. He comes out of the system himself, was educated at Harvard, and offers sober analyses.”

*Perry Link, Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies, Princeton University*

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## Origins of China's Institutions and Totalitarianism

CHENGGANG XU

*Stanford University*





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*To Di Guo, my beloved wife*

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book analyzes the origins and evolution of totalitarianism from the perspective of institutional genes, focusing on Chinese institutions. Contemporary China's system is the largest and most enduring totalitarian system in human history, with a profound impact on the world. The concept of institutional genes is introduced to help overcome analytical difficulties in this multidisciplinary exploration.

It encapsulates over half a century of my research and thoughts on the totalitarian nature of communism. My inquiry into this subject began in 1967, at the height of the Cultural Revolution. This was driven by the stark contradictions I observed between the rhetoric of communist propaganda, which depicted the Communist Party/society as a paradise on Earth, and the brutal reality of the totalitarian regime and its practices. This contrast extended to the ideal of a classless society promised by communism and the actual endless, ruthless class struggles, along with the emergence of institutionalized privileged social groups in the regime. Despite approaching this subject from a Marxist perspective, my research on the communist system, which was strictly prohibited, led to over a year of imprisonment and more than five years of enforced labor on a farm. Only after the end of the Cultural Revolution was I able to resume this intellectual journey.

While earlier experiences and observations provided a foundational motivation, they alone were insufficient for a deep scientific exploration of the topics in this book. The principles and methodologies in social sciences acquired through my economics training at Harvard and subsequent professional experiences have been particularly influential. Notably, the insights from Kornai's political economy of communism, Maskin's theory of mechanism design, Hart's theory of property rights, and North's theory of path dependence

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have significantly shaped my perspective. These intellectual contributions are evident throughout the book.

This book reflects the profound spiritual influence of my parents, Liang-Ying Xu, a historian and philosopher of science, and Lai-Di Wang, a historian of modern China. Beyond the impact of their lifelong works, their intellectual pursuits in the last two decades are particularly relevant to this book. During this period, they embarked on a project titled “The History of Democracy” (originally “The Theory of Democracy”), which analyzed the evolution of constitutional democracy in the West and the challenges faced by China, especially in modern times. Our numerous and in-depth discussions covered a range of important concepts and historical facts, including democracy, constitutionalism, totalitarianism, the creation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the challenges China has faced since the nineteenth century, and the painful yet profound reflections of some veteran CCP members on themselves and the communist regime. These conversations also delved into reform and related social issues. Despite amassing a wealth of profound thoughts and knowledge, they were unable to complete their book due to their advanced age. As such, I consider a substantial part of this book as both a continuation and a tribute to their scholarly endeavors.

My first PhD research project at Harvard involved a game theory model analyzing power structures within a totalitarian regime. I learned a lot from my co-supervisors Kornai and Andreu Mas-Colell. Although I eventually moved away from this project for my PhD due to dissatisfaction with the cooperative game-theoretical approach and the lack of predictive power in my model, my refocusing on communist totalitarianism was merely postponed.

Mechanism design theory, including theory of information and incentives, taught by Eric Maskin, was transformative for me in reconsidering how to analyze institutions and institutional changes, particularly in the context of totalitarianism. After completing my PhD, working jointly with Eric and engaging in countless discussions

with him provided me with further opportunities to deepen my understanding of this aspect.

Under the guidance of Maskin and Kornai, the focus of my doctoral dissertation shifted to an analysis of the planned economy as an institutional barrier to disruptive innovation. While this work did not directly address the political power of a totalitarian system, it enhanced my understanding of the nature of a communist totalitarian system from the perspective of innovation and long-term growth.

Janos Kornai's unwavering focus on the totalitarian nature of the communist regime has been crucial in my intellectual journey. In the summer of 1989, when I was a PhD student, I had daily exchanges with him about the communist crackdown and massacres in Beijing, drawing parallels to the suppressed Hungarian Revolution from thirty years prior. Later, during my tenure at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the 1990s, Kornai invited me to lecture on China's reforms at Harvard. In his comments, he cast deep doubts on China's gradual reform, highlighting the CCP's apparent unwillingness to cede absolute power. He argued that it was impossible for the CCP to transition gradually from a one-party to a multiparty system. This perspective was reinforced a decade later. In 2009, after I presented my paper analyzing China's regionally decentralized authoritarianism at the United Nations University conference commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kornai responded by emphasizing the unyielding totalitarian nature of the Chinese communist regime and its potential impact on China's long-run trajectory. The version later published in the *Journal of Economic Literature* (Xu, 2011) reflects revisions made in response to his comments. So to this book.

I must express my gratitude to my long-term co-authors, Eric Maskin, Katharina Pistor, Yingyi Qian, and Gérard Roland. Some of the ideas expressed in several chapters are, to some extent, related to or inspired by our discussions during our decade-long joint work in the 1990s and the 2000s. Particularly, I would like to thank Yingyi Qian, my longest-standing collaborator. We worked together from

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my doctoral student days for nearly two decades. Our past discussions about Chinese institutions have influenced the formation of the ideas in parts of this book. Furthermore, some ideas discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 were inspired or stimulated by conversations with Patrick Bolton and Oliver Hart. My heartfelt thanks go out to all of them for their stimulating collaboration in the past and enduring friendship. However, the views expressed in this book are solely my own and I am the only person responsible for any potential errors or controversies.

The completion of this book is a testament to the support of many individuals and institutions. I am especially grateful to the Stanford Center on China's Economy and Institutions (SCCEI) for its generous financial backing and invaluable support in various other aspects, and to the co-directors of the SCCEI, Scott Rozelle and Hongbin Li, for their enthusiastic and long-lasting support of my work. Additionally, I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks for the 2019 Dr. Hsieh Memorial Lecture at Stanford University, the bimonthly lecture series hosted by SCCEI and many seminars organized by the Hoover Institution, during the book's development. These events provided a platform to systematically present and refine the ideas in this project and offered invaluable opportunities to share my views with multidisciplinary scholars. Feedback from insightful audiences is essential in improving the book. Moreover, I must thank Debin Ma. His invitation for me to contribute a chapter to the *Cambridge Economic History of China* provided a platform to encapsulate the core ideas of this book and an opportunity to obtain valuable feedback during the writing process.

My affiliations with the University of Hong Kong, Tsinghua University, Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business, and Stanford University have been integral to the development of this book, with parts being incorporated into some of my teachings. I am deeply thankful for the support and generous funding provided by these institutions, as well as the contributions of colleagues and students there. Additionally, my visits to Seoul National University, the



Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Corvinus University of Budapest, the LSE, and Imperial College London have significantly contributed to this work. The feedback and insights from colleagues and students at these institutions have been invaluable and I am immensely grateful for their support and hospitality.

Additionally, I want to thank all the participants in my presentations on related topics for their valuable feedback, comments, and critiques. These include the annual meetings of the Association for Comparative Economic Studies, the Asia Society, the Bank of Israel, University of California Berkeley, University of California San Diego, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Bucknell University, University of Chicago, the Chinese Economists Society, Chatham House, Corvinus University of Budapest, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the University of Duisburg-Essen, Harvard University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Japan Association for Chinese Economic Studies annual meetings, the Japanese Institute of Development Economics, Hitotsubashi, the University of Tokyo, the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, National Bureau of Economic Research, the Ronald Coase Institute (Tel Aviv and Warsaw seminars), Stanford University, Seoul National University, School of Oriental and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, Academia Sinica, National Taiwan University, Tsinghua University (Beijing), Tsinghua University (Taiwan), National Chengchi University, Utrecht University, and the World Interdisciplinary Network for Institutional Research conferences.

I must express my heartfelt gratitude to my colleagues and friends, who generously spent a considerable amount of time reading portions or all of the manuscript. Their valuable criticisms and insightful suggestions have been immensely helpful in improving this book. They are: Alexandra Benham, Lee Benham, Michael Bernstam, Patrick Bolton, Darrell Duffie, Joseph Esherick, Ge Zhaoguang, Paul Gregory, Oliver Hart, Perry Link, Michael McFaul, Eric Maskin,

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Numerous friends and colleagues have provided valuable feedback and comments in various ways. They either supported or inspired me, corrected my mistakes, or offered insights that enriched the content of this book. I want to express my sincere gratitude to all of them. While the list of those deserving acknowledgment is extensive and it is difficult to name everyone, I would like to particularly thank Daron Acemoglu, Ron Anderson, Masahiko Aoki, Ying Bai, Alexandra Benham, Lee Benham, Daniel Berkowitz, Jude Blanchette, Patrick Bolton, Xia Cai, Hsiang-Ke Chao, Tien-Chih Chen, Xiaoping Chen, Zhiwu Chen, Robert Daly, Larry Diamond, Ke Ding, David Donald, Darrell Duffie, Simon Ertz, Hanming Fang, Roger Gordon, Avner Greif, Yan Guo, Oliver Hart, Di He, Zhiguo He, Nancy Hearst, Chang-Tai Hsieh, Chao-Hsi Huang, Yasheng Huang, Ruixue Jia, János Kornai, Marton Krasznai, James Kung, Fei-fei Li, Hongbin Li, Weijia Li, Thung-Hong Lin, Yusheng Lin, Perry Link, Debin Ma, Eric Maskin, Scott MacLeod, Paul Milgrom, Kenneth Murphy, Roger Myerson, Barry Naughton, Douglass North, Minxin Pei, Yuri Pines, Shitong Qiao, Xiao Qin, Gerard Roland, Miklos Rosta, Scott Rozelle, Susan Shirk, Mary Shirley, Zheng Song, George Soros, Michael Spence, Yi-chun Tao, Glenn Tiffert, Ai-He Wang, Yijiang Wang, Barry Weingast, Roy Bin Wong, Guoguang Wu, Jinglian Wu, Yang Xie, Wei Xiong, Guoqi Xu, Yiqing Xu, David Yang, Kuo-chun Yeh, Leslie Young, Miles Yu, Li Yuan, Lun Zhang, Renzhen Zhang, Shuxin Zhang, Hang Zhou, Xueguang Zhou, Hengfu Zou, and David Zweig.

Additionally, I am indebted to many of my fellow Chinese colleagues and friends who have contributed to this book but for well-known reasons have chosen not to have their names mentioned here. Their silent support has been vital to this project.

To ensure the precise and clear expression of my ideas, reasoning, and narratives in both Chinese and English and to avoid distortions

in a strict translation, this book has been written in both languages. Each version stands as an original, with neither being a direct translation of the other. In the course of my research related to this book, the majority of the original notes for the subtopics were drafted in English and others were in Chinese. In synthesizing the first draft of the entire book, the initial step involved compiling the original note fragments into Chinese. Subsequently, the Chinese draft was translated into an English draft. Based on this, the final English version was created through substantial revisions and rewriting. Then, using the English version as a reference, the final Chinese version was created by revising the initial Chinese draft. Throughout this process, my focus was on expressing ideas with clarity and accuracy, rather than achieving complete consistency in every sentence or word across the two languages. Therefore, I allowed for slight variations in expression and even in some minor details between the two language versions.

I am particularly grateful to Lei Huang and Ximing Yin for their outstanding assistance in transcribing and editing crucial parts of the initial manuscripts. I also wish to express my gratitude to Christopher MacDonald, whose excellent translation from Chinese forms the greater part of the content of this book. Following translation, the book was significantly modified and rewritten and any errors or oversights in the resulting text are mine alone. My sincere gratitude extends to Minjun Cai, Nancy Hearst, and Yingbo Shi for their editorial support. Heartfelt thanks also go to David C. Donald, Katherina Pistor, Hang Zhou, and an anonymous friend for their valuable advice and assistance with the legal aspects of this book's publishing process. Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Chris Harrison and my editor, Joe Ng, for their unwavering support and expert guidance throughout this journey. The genesis of this book dates back nearly a decade, beginning with a discussion in my office at the University of Hong Kong with Chris. Joe's enthusiasm was pivotal in encouraging me to move forward with the formal publishing process. The book would not have reached its full potential without the dedication and expertise of both Chris and Joe.

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Di. Her unconditional love, profound understanding, and unwavering care have been the pillars enabling me to complete this work. She is much more than my beloved companion; as a fellow scholar in the social sciences, she has been my closest colleague, my soul mate, and keenest critic of my scholarship. Throughout the decade-long journey of crafting this book, it has woven itself into the very fabric of our family life. Almost all the ideas expressed in this book were first shared with her as my initial listener and critic, often before they were committed to writing. She has been the diligent first reader and editor of every chapter, tirelessly reviewing each page in both English and Chinese. Together, we humbly hope that this book will not only enhance scholarly understanding of the totalitarian communist system but also, in time, make a modest contribution to the journey towards freedom for our fellow Chinese.

## Abbreviations

AB	Anti-Bolshevik
ARM	Anti-Rightist Movement
CAC	Cyber Administration of China
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CBE	Commune-Brigade Enterprise
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDL	China Democratic League
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CEE	Central Eastern Europe
Comintern	Communist International
CPC	Council of People's Commissars
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CR	Cultural Revolution
CRG	Cultural Revolution Group
CRP	Chinese Revolutionary Party
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EU	European Union
FCA	Friends of the Constitution Association
FSU-EE	Former Soviet Union and Eastern European Countries
GAC	Government Affairs Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLF	Great Leap Forward
Gosplan	State Planning Committee
GPU	State Political Directorate (Soviet)
GUGB	Main Directorate of State Security (Soviet Union)
HRE	Holy Roman Empire

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IPO	Initial Public Offering
KGB	Committee for State Security (Soviet Union)
KMT	Kuomintang
KSC	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Soviet)
NPC	National People's Congress
NRA	National Revolutionary Army
OGPU	Joint State Political Directorate (Soviet Union)
PBOC	People's Bank of China
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
PUWP	Polish United Workers' Party
RADT	Regionally Administered Totalitarianism
RCP	Russian Communist Party
RDA	Regionally Decentralized Authoritarianism
ROC	Republic of China
RPL	Railway Protection League
RPM	Railway Protection Movement
RSDLP	Russian Social Democratic Labor Party
RUC	Renmin University of China
SAMR	State Administration for Market Regulation
SASAC	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission
SBC	Soft Budget Constraint
SDP	Social Democratic Party of Germany
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SPQR	Senatus Populusque Romanus (The Senate and the Roman People)
SR	Socialist Revolutionary (Party)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS   xxv

TFP	Total Factor Productivity
TVE	Township Village Enterprise
UFWD	United Front Work Department
URW	Union of Railway Workers
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization