Introduction: Beyond Implicit Political Dichotomies and Linear Models of Change in China

Vivienne Shue and Patricia M. Thornton

How, practically speaking, amid all the economic and political turbulence of the twenty-first century, is the Chinese polity – as immense and as formidably fissured as it has now become – being governed? And what are the soundest approaches students and scholars can now choose to employ in the quest for fuller answers to all the many dimensions of this puzzling question? These are the unsolved problems of understanding that preoccupy us in this volume.

The essays to come have their origins in a conference convened at Oxford University in the spring of 2012,[1] but each one has been revised in light of more recent political developments. As late as 2011, as we were sending out the invitations, we still thought of the research task we and our conference participants would face as essentially exploratory – one of mapping an expanding universe of changing political practices widely recognized to be emerging in China. Our initial charge to our conference contributors was simply that they consider the complex of *processes* entailed in "governing and being governed" in the contemporary Chinese context, and utilize their own most recent research investigations and data to illuminate *some* dimension of how governance is currently being approached and realized. This investigative and empirical orientation was not chosen with a view to building a comprehensive characterization of the deep nature or final trajectory of the governing system as a whole, but instead intended to sample what we suspected would be a broad and unevenly choreographed *repertoire* of governing practices. The open-endedness of that initial approach has, we still believe, encouraged our authors to feature in their essays here some of those governing

[1] The conference on "Power in the Making: Governing and Being Governed in Contemporary China" was organized by the University of Oxford's Contemporary China Studies Programme, a ten-year research development initiative generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust. We are grateful to all those who attended and took part in that meeting for their many insights, and wish to record our thanks also to Christopher Kutarna who served as rapporteur.

practices that have previously been relegated to the margins of view. And it has allowed us all to highlight some of the fascinating, occasionally ironic, internal inconsistencies and jarring anomalies of a decidedly mixed system that is still in the making.

As of this writing in 2016, however, we have concluded that it has become possible, indeed necessary, to press our modest initial conceptual agenda still further forward. On the basis of what we have learned from the diverse studies collected here, as well as from other recent work in the fields of Chinese and comparative political and social studies, we wish to suggest a refreshed framework for approaching the study of governance in China, and what we hope may serve as a progressive new orientation for future research. But before presuming to point to any new way forward, it is necessary for us to provide an overview and reconsideration of just where our field of study has lately been.

In the Anglophone scholarship on Chinese society and politics over recent decades, with its emphasis on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led effort at "system reform," some analysts have chosen to highlight signs of "progress" in the direction of a more liberal, open, and popularly responsive future for the Chinese polity. Others have dwelt instead on system reform failures and the many remaining "obstacles" to achieving a genuine transition to democracy. As we hope this volume may help serve to illustrate, these undeniably complex and seemingly contradictory trends that scholars based in the West have observed and recorded have often been conceptualized and debated against the backdrop of overly drawn distinctions between democratic and non-democratic *regime types*. And they have tended to concentrate too narrowly on governing *institutions* as opposed to governing *practices*. They have failed, thereby, to capture adequately the wide assortment of idioms and the interlaced array of channels through which political evolution may proceed.

From Transition Studies to Authoritarian Resilience

A quarter of a century ago the entire world, much taken by surprise, witnessed the spectacle of serial socialist state breakdowns that the esteemed American political scientist Ken Jowitt was prompt to label the "Leninist extinction."[2] Amazed and elated, many observers in the West then began thinking in terms of world history's cartwheeling smartly into a brand new "post-communist" era – an era of comprehensive transition toward democratic systems of governance in countries all

[2] Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction.*

around the globe, including China. Hopes were high then, in the West, for a rather speedy Chinese transition to democracy, through one scenario or another. As Andrew Nathan was retrospectively to acknowledge, in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis "many China specialists and democracy theorists – myself among them – expected the regime to fall to democratization's 'third wave.' [But] instead, the regime has reconsolidated itself."[3] Recognizing then that the "causes of its resilience are complex," Nathan nonetheless went on to single out the degree and nature of the Chinese regime's institutionalization – which he defined in terms of the "adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of state organizations" – as playing the determinative role in ensuring its suppleness and survival through the Deng Xiaoping era, and beyond.

Nathan's 2003 observations about Chinese party-state institutions were in keeping with the findings of a growing number of other studies within the broader field of comparative governance. Scholars of politics in other contemporary settings had by then begun documenting the dynamics of an "undemocratic undertow" detected in the wake of democracy's "third wave." Certain authoritarian regimes were found to be stubbornly "resilient" or "durable" in face both of internal and external challenges. As Snyder was to note, the final ebbing of the third wave saw entrenched totalitarian and post-totalitarian party-states maintain their grip on power not only in the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also in North Korea, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam; autocratic monarchies persisted in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan; dictatorships, theocracies, ethnocracies, and military regimes continued to survive across the globe.[4] Thus, by the dawn of the twenty-first century "transitology," and what Carothers had famously called the "transition paradigm,"[5] were already showing signs of having exhausted their usefulness –particularly as "hybrid" political regimes (partly authoritarian and partly democratic) were perceived to be proliferating.

Without missing a beat then, a new generation of Western scholarship began probing the characteristics and dynamics of these more obstinate authoritarian regimes, mapping out broader taxonomies to include newly recognized categories as well, such as "competitive autocracies" and "defective democracies."[6] In contrast to an earlier scholarly literature on non-democracies, which had posited that it was the defective design of state institutions that would ultimately undermine the hold of elites on

[3] Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," 6.
[4] Snyder, "Beyond Electoral Authoritarianism."
[5] Carothers, "The End of the Transitions Paradigm."
[6] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies"; Bogaards, "How to Classify Hybrid Regimes?"

power in authoritarian regimes,[7] a growing number of studies in the emerging field of "comparative authoritarianism" argued instead that autocratic elites were becoming adept at creating modern political institutions that would consolidate their hold on power and, in so doing, successfully foster more durable forms of authoritarian rule. Increasingly, this newer scholarship regards the existence of liberalizing and democratic institutions, such as political parties and legislatures in autocracies, no longer as mere fig leaves thinly disguising the exercise of coercive and repressive power. Instead, it links the structures and functions of such institutions to popular quiescence, social stability, and regime survival, significantly altering our understanding of how authoritarianism actually works, on the inside.[8] This rapidly developing literature not only posits that institutions and organizations "matter" in non-democracies, it employs functionalist models[9] to demonstrate that political institutions are in fact *the critical causal variables* in the survival of authoritarian regimes.

This so-called "institutional turn" in the comparative study of authoritarianism[10] has already had a significant impact on scholarship in the China field. Nathan's influential article coining the term "authoritarian resilience" in reference to the post-Mao party-state argued that sustained popular support for the government was owed in large part to the skillful deployment of a variety of "input institutions" that worked to siphon off popular discontent without destabilizing the system as a whole.[11] Dali Yang's *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan* argued, in a similar vein, that since the late 1980s the post-Deng leadership had responded to periodic crises by rebuilding the "institutional sinews of the central state," undertaking costly but necessary administrative restructuring which, in turn, improved governance.[12] Several recent studies point to the functional adaptability of the CCP itself in ensuring system survival, highlighting the regularization and upgrading of internal party procedures governing cadre appointments, promotions, and management,[13] including leadership training and education.[14] The considerable malleability of

[7] Bunce, *Subversive Institutions.*
[8] Key works in this vein include Brownlee's *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Gandhi's *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*; Levitsky and Way's *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Magaloni's *Voting for Autocracy*; and Slater's *Ordering Power*. For a fine review of some of this literature, see Art, "What Do We Know about Authoritarianism after Ten Years?"
[9] Jones, "Seeing like an Autocrat," 26; Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*, 2–3.
[10] Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism."
[11] Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," 6. [12] Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan.*
[13] Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism*; Edin, "State Capacity and Local Agent Control."
[14] Tsai and Dean, "The CCP's Learning System"; Pieke, *The Good Communist.*

party ideology, further, is cited by some as an important contributor to its longevity;[15] while others put more emphasis on the important role of *informal* institutions in ensuring party-state survival. Kellee Tsai, for example, singles out the role of informal coping strategies deployed by actors working in local settings to expand the range of allowable activities and responses within preexisting institutions. These "informal adaptive institutions" in her view, which range from the quasi-legalization of private enterprise to the calculated expansion of the party's ranks to embrace private entrepreneurs, and even the amendment of the state constitution to sanction private sector development, all worked, without ever subverting the prevailing political system, to adjust and enlarge existing institutions of state power and address new challenges.[16] Likewise, in her work on public goods provision in rural China, Lily Tsai highlights the roles of "informal institutions of accountability" in bolstering the resilience of the system. Looking at local solidary groups – chiefly village temple associations whose activities foster a sense of shared moral obligation between local officials and rural residents – she documents how extra-bureaucratic, extra-legal forms of community accountability can supplement the perceived legitimacy, and increase the responsiveness, of a multi-tiered governing apparatus otherwise acutely prone to remoteness and rigidity.[17]

Even as these new studies helped to deepen our understanding of the workings of "authoritarian resilience," however, they also revealed a wide and partly conflicting range of opinions coexisting within the Chinese elite regarding the ultimate rationales and longer-term goals of political reform, as well as its optimal timing and sequencing.[18] These internal debates were protracted, and frequently fierce. With so much intense elite contestation about *how to reform and reinvigorate the party-state system* going on inside China itself, a few unflinching scholars, like Jean-Pierre Cabestan, were moved to question the necessary inevitability of Western-style liberalization and raise instead the possibility "that China will once again innovate and manage its retreat from communism through a movement towards a softer but stabilized authoritarianism." Cabestan envisioned evolution into a system "that is consultative yet also elitist and corporatist"; one "equipped with a certain legal modernity but not with the rule of law, and only partly institutionalized."[19] Most scholars in the

[15] Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*; Holbig, *Ideological Reform and Regime Legitimacy*; Dickson, *Wealth into Power*.
[16] Tsai, "Adaptive Informal Institutions." [17] Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy*.
[18] See, e.g., Dittmer, "Three Visions"; Heberer and Schubert, "Political Reform and Regime Legitimacy."
[19] Cabestan, "Is China Moving?," 21.

field, however, like John Lewis and Litai Xue, remained inclined to rule out any satisfactory middle way or "soft authoritarian" solution in the longer run. Either simply overlooking or thoroughly discounting many of the actual reforms that were then ongoing within the party, as well as the lively internal contestation over the very meaning of "political system reform" itself, they concluded instead that "one party rule in China" is still just "living on borrowed time."[20] A *clear choice* against authoritarianism and in favor of democracy would still, one day, have to be made, they argued, on the grounds that, "More challenging forms of political competition will sooner or later emerge as divergent interests further fracture party unity and as the disfranchised and disconnected elements of society seek political justice and coalesce into a viable opposition."[21]

Much of the most sophisticated scholarship in the China studies field of late has, thus, still left us juggling uncomfortably with an antinomy. The mounting evidence does seem to show that, over the years, the CCP has, on the one hand, learned how to rule more subtly and astutely than before. And yet, many have predicted that the "reform-authoritarian" learning curve of the party-state will not extend indefinitely, particularly in light of continuously rising levels of social protest and rampantly festering official corruption. As Andrew Nathan once again, embracing the "performance legitimacy" approach to analyzing the party-state's longevity, has more recently observed, the presumed durability of China's authoritarian pact remains contingent upon the party's ability to deliver consistently high rates of economic growth and deflect internal challenges. But, in order to do so, the "regime must perform constantly like a team of acrobats on a high wire, staving off all crises while keeping its act flawlessly together." Under such tenuous conditions, rather than as a display of "resilience," he suggests that the state of affairs in China now might better be characterized as one of "authoritarian impermanence."[22] Pei Minxin and Cheng Li have likewise sounded speculative early warning bells on the continued longevity of China's ostensibly resilient authoritarian regime, citing a decline in the CCP's capacity to coopt new elites, the crystallization of increasingly activist oppositional forces within Chinese society, and persistent schisms within the upper echelons of the party.[23] Writing on the eve of the world

[20] Dickson, *Red Capitalists*; Cabestan, "Is China Moving?"; Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan*; Schubert, "Reforming Authoritarianism"; and Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy*.
[21] Lewis and Xue, "Social Change and Political Reform," 942.
[22] Nathan, "Authoritarian Impermanence."
[23] Li, "The End of the CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism?"; Pei, "Is CCP Rule Fragile or Resilient?"

financial crisis and drawing attention to what some continued to treat as a puzzling contrast between the PRC's remarkably positive economic performance and its autocratic political vulnerabilities, Susan Shirk similarly went so far as to tag China as the "fragile superpower."[24]

Among prominent scholars based within the PRC itself, Sun Liping has drawn attention to the ways in which the "phantom of instability" (不稳定幻像) continues to drive a vicious circle of repression that he predicts will likely produce large-scale social unrest in the future.[25] Yu Jianrong has criticized the Hu-Wen government's pursuit of a "socialist harmonious society" as having generated instead a form of "rigid stability" (刚性稳定) that may easily be broken, because it is based on the coercive power of the state to suppress social interests. The only way to reduce the mounting pressure on the system as a whole, Yu argues, is through a combination of "fundamental institutional change and institution-building" and construction of "a robustly institutionalized mechanism for the protection of rights."[26] Sooner or later – or so the evidence seems to indicate to many experts, both in and outside of China, "authoritarian resilience" must somehow be supplanted by genuinely liberal, more democratic, political institutions to avert the potential future crisis of state collapse.

The Limits of the Authoritarian Resilience Paradigm

Thus, at its core, notwithstanding Carothers' hasty proclamation of the end of transitology and the "transition paradigm," this newer scholarly literature on comparative authoritarianism continues to be driven – either explicitly or implicitly – by a conspicuous intellectual yearning to explain the incomplete, partial, and failed "third wave" of democratization. As Howard and Walters point out in a recent critique, the continued reliance upon "[t]erms such as 'authoritarian persistence' and 'authoritarian resilience' ... imply that authoritarianism is somehow unnatural or unsustainable under normal circumstances, thus unintentionally bringing back some of the assumptions of 'transitology' that were supposedly rejected" by the initial champions of the concept. The failure of political scientists to predict first the Soviet collapse in the aftermath of the 1989 Eastern European revolutions, and then the cascading effects of social mobilization during the 2011 Arab Spring, they reason, is the result of analysts' having overemphasized in their models "the prospects for or barriers to democratic reform," thus

[24] Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower.* [25] Sun Liping, "The 'Phantom of Instability'."
[26] Yu Jianrong, "From Rigid Stability to Resilient Stability"; Yu Jianrong, "The Present Predicament of Stability Maintenance," 6.

limiting "the purview of what political developments are seen as relevant and important objects of study."[27]

Sensing, as an abiding imperative, a need to *explain* the persistent non-transition of stable autocracies and probe the reasons for the incomplete transition of a range of functional hybrid political regimes then, contemporary scholars of comparative authoritarianism have crafted painstaking, and undoubtedly insightful, accounts that center on the institutions – formal, informal, and adaptive – upon which non-democracies rely in consolidating and perpetuating their rule. In this work, however, the precise connection between particular institutions and overall regime resilience remains, as Karen Orren and Steven Skowronek have observed, still more often presumed than conclusively demonstrated. As they see it, what the neo-institutionalist turn in political science has produced, in large part due to its undergirding assumptions about how institutions operate within political systems, is "an increasingly elaborate iconography of order." Whether institutions are taken to be the crystallization of a political culture's fundamental value orientations, or as the "rules of the game" that shape behavior within a political order, or as the structures and procedures that determine the strategic context within which individuals calculate their self-interest, Orren and Skowronek argue that institutions have long been equated with homeostatic equilibria in political regimes. The enduring focus on institutions as "pillars of order in politics" frequently serves to exaggerate the fixity of political institutions, while eliding the inherent systemic fragilities, maladaptive responses, and "patterned anarchy" that actually comprise the core of much of political life. They conclude that the near-exclusive focus in much institutional analysis on explaining stability, order, and regularity "has obscured a good deal of what is characteristic about institutions in politics and what they have to teach us about political change."[28]

Arguably also, with respect to the study of non-democracies, a neo-institutionalist "iconography of order" may potentially be especially misleading, because institutions in authoritarian regimes commonly exist and operate at the discretion of rulers and their supporting elites.[29] Whereas political institutions in democratic systems are generally interpreted to represent the equilibria of a game among open competitors that is stable, durable, and robust, in authoritarian political contexts, institutions are particularly susceptible to strategic manipulation by powerful elites. As Thomas Pepinsky points out, despite its use of sophisticated

[27] Howard and Walters, "Explaining the Unexpected."
[28] Orren and Skowronek, "Beyond the Iconography of Order."
[29] Lagacé and Gandhi, "Authoritarian Institutions."

qualitative and quantitative research designs, the existing "state-of-the-art" in empirical research on comparative authoritarianism has failed to demonstrate the causal effects of institutions on regime durability and resilience.[30] Non-democratic regimes and the institutions that sustain them *may* persist over long periods of time, appearing to weather shocks and challenges, but may *also* – as was the case with the collapse of communist party-states across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – suddenly and quite unexpectedly melt away, despite the persistence of adequately functioning institutions.[31] As Andrew Walder acknowledged in retrospect about the wave that brought down single-party-states beginning in 1989: "While today we can look back upon an inexorable cumulative crisis, a few years ago one could just as easily be struck by how little ... deeply rooted problems seemed to shake these stable and stagnant regimes ... [these] regimes [had] appeared [then] to be tougher, more resilient than other varieties of authoritarian rule – and in fact they *were*."[32] *Ex post facto* explanations of collapse that centered primarily on institutional factors, as Stathis Kalyvas argues, failed to differentiate between the relative impacts of institutional decline over the longer term, and the more immediate precipitants of institutional breakdown, and therefore ultimately could not provide a conclusive and robust answer to the question, "Why 1989?"[33] Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that institutionally grounded arguments stressing systemic exhaustion can be interpreted as predicting *both* path-dependent self-perpetuation *and* sudden self-destruction in equal measure and, for that reason, lack real explanatory power.[34]

Not all researchers working within an institutionalist paradigm, of course, were contributing to quite such a static iconography. Those, especially, who were keenly involved in developing alternative modes of *comparative-historical* analysis had begun tackling questions about how institutions can and do change; thus moving away from older-style institutionalist exercises in "comparative statics," to generate something of a "burst of interest in institutional change."[35] New concepts such as "bounded innovation" and "gradual transformative change" – concepts aiming explicitly to conjoin *structure* with *process* as observed over time – gained currency,[36] especially in the study of advanced capitalism's

[30] Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn," 633–635. [31] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever.*
[32] Walder, "The Decline of Communist Power," 297–298; See also Dimitrov, "Understanding Communist Collapse and Resilience."
[33] Kalyvas, "The Decay and Breakdown," 334.
[34] Walder, "The Decline of Communist Power," 297.
[35] Hacker, Pierson and Thelen, "Drift and Conversion," 203.
[36] As, e.g., in Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity.*

morphing economic institutions. To a degree, this newer, more evolutionary, strain in comparative-historical thinking also informed the recent spate of work analyzing, comparatively, the conditions and dynamics of durable authoritarianism.[37] Little of this explicitly more process-oriented or "evolutionary" historical institutionalism, however, seems to have made its way into the literature on China.[38]

More widely noted, within the subfield of Chinese politics, has been some interesting work done lately by Elizabeth Perry, Sebastian Heilmann, and others, aimed at broadening our working concepts concerning adaptive authoritarianism. Rejecting excessively static or linear path-dependency perspectives on "resilience" in favor of an *agency-centered* definition of adaptability, Perry and Heilmann find that it is "the capacity of actors in a system to further resilience" through a *process of continual adjustment* that generally outweighs the importance of institutional mechanisms per se in securing regime persistence. In their reading, regime resilience depends on the ability and willingness of individual and collective *actors* either to innovate or to break from the "rules of the game," and to engage in "maximum tinkering" that may produce new discoveries and novel solutions to existing problems. Inasmuch as the CCP's "guerrilla policy style," as Perry and Heilmann identify and define it, is experimentalist and non-repetitive, they decline to characterize or classify it as an "informal institution." In their 2011 volume instead, through a series of retrospective studies, they trace this distinctive practice of policy generation permitting maximal flexibility as it was in operation *from the Mao era forward* across a broad range of policy areas, and down to the present day.[39]

Yet, despite the salutary theoretical efforts of scholars to leaven institutionalist linearity with considerations of "process" and "agency," the very concepts of adaptation and resilience, which have been imported into comparative governance studies from the ecological and engineering sciences, each carry core assumptions of their own that are problematic

[37] Levitsky and Way, "Not Just What, but When (and How)."
[38] For one very recent exception, however, see Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*.
[39] Perry and Heilmann, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand*. Even more recently, Martin Dimitrov and his collaborators have attempted a reprise of the institutionalist framework in synthesis with the continuous adjustment approach as it was articulated by Perry and Heilmann. Their research, which centers on adaptations within consolidated communist states in the realms of economy, ideology, party inclusiveness, and those institutions that promote official accountability, leads them to formulate a theory-straddling contention that the resilience of mature communist party-states "is a function of *continuous adaptive institutional change*," and ultimately to draw the spin-off conclusion that whereas the resilience of mature communist party-states "depends on the ability of [these] regimes to adapt, collapse is more likely when the regimes are no longer capable of implementing adaptive change." Dimitrov, ed., *Why Communism Did Not Collapse*, 3–4 (italics added), 16.