

**(Q1) Examine The Main Ways In Which China's Authoritarian System Sustains Itself.**

**Introduction**

The aim of this essay is to examine the main ways in which China's authoritarian system sustains itself. Regime theory maintains that authoritarian systems "are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralisation of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms" (Nathan, 2003, p.6). China's authoritarian system however has proven rather resilient. This essay argues that three factors are predominantly responsible for the 'authoritarian resilience' of China's regime. The first factor relates to the Chinese middle-class indifference to democracy - which apart from the theoretical implications to modernization theory, binds the CCP and China's middle-class together which further sustains the one-party system within China (Chen & Chunlong, 2011). The second factor is the 'institutionalization' of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) - the process in which "organizations and

procedures acquire value and stability" (Huntington, 1968 p.12). The institutionalization of the CCP has increased public legitimacy, satiated China's political elites and demonstrates that the regime is able to adapt and survive. The third and final factor, are the CCP's sophisticated forms of control which are used to crush remaining dissent and opposition to the one party system. Broadly speaking these factors indicate that China relies on repression, legitimation and co-optation to sustain itself, all of which is to say the regime is sustained by agential, not just structural conditions. The findings also indicate that China's regime enjoys a high degree of social support from both above and below, a key factor in its survival. The essay proceeds as follows. The first section briefly classifies the regime type of China. The second section then critically reviews the modernization literature that links China's prospects of democratization to its economic growth. Contrary to modernization theory, this essay examines how China remains unlikely to democratize, even with sustained modernization and an

increasing middle class. Having demonstrated that China is an outlier in relation to classical modernization theory, the third section explicates the factors outlined above to demonstrate how they create a favourable environment for China's authoritarian system to sustain itself.

### **Classifying China's Regime Type**

The post-Cold War period was marked by the proliferation of 'hybrid' political regimes. To various degrees, polities across Africa, Eurasia and Latin America had "combined democratic rules with authoritarian governance" (Levitsky and Way, 2002, p.51). Within academia, this led to the concept of 'new authoritarianism', which increased the typology of authoritarian regimes to include: 'hybrid regimes' (Shevtsova, 2001), Competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2010) and electoral Autocracy (Kailitz, 2013). In order to situate China's regime within the vast authoritarian literature, a base definition is required for *authoritarianism*. Using Levitsky and Way's definition, *full*

*authoritarianism* is "a regime in which no viable channels exist for opposition to contest legally for executive power" (Levitsky and Way, 2010, pp.6-7). There are numerous regimes that fall under the category of *full authoritarianism*, differences among which pose considerable theoretical importance (Snyder, 2006). However what ties them together is the lack of significant legal contestation of power. China's system falls under *full authoritarianism* and can be categorised as a single-party regime. That is to say that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is controlled unanimously by the Chinese Communist Party. Following the political turmoil left by Mao Zedong with policies such as the 'Great Leap Forward' and the 'cultural revolution', Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970's initiated major reforms in an attempt to modernise the state. Economic and ideological controls were relaxed which fuelled an unprecedented thirty-year long economic boom (Minzner, 2011, p.1). Despite these economic reforms, the Chinese central government has been vehemently opposed to fundamental political reform. Peaceful protests were

repressed with brutal force, most notably the Tiananmen square demonstrations in 1989 and the Falun Gong movement after 1999. Many democracy theorists in the wake of the Tiananmen square massacre had predicted the regime would fall to democratization's 'third wave' (Waldron, 1998; Brzezinski, 1998). However, defying expectations, China has reconsolidated the regime, while simultaneously modernising. Under conditions "that elsewhere have led to democratic transition, China has made a transition instead from totalitarianism to a classic authoritarian regime, and one that appears increasingly stable" (Nathan, 2003, p.16). More recently, concerns have been raised that China is shifting away from "a one-party authoritarian state that systemically curbs fundamental rights" (Human Rights Watch, 2021) to an increasingly totalitarian state. Utilising Friedrich and Brzezinski's (1956) seminal definition of totalitarianism, which is presented as an ideal type of six interrelated traits – academics have posed serious questions as to whether China is sliding back into totalitarianism. The six

interrelated traits are: (1) an official ideology; (2) A single party, led by an all powerful leader; (3) terroristic policing/mechanism; (4) a communications monopoly; (5) a weapons monopoly; and (6) a centrally directed economy (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956). Edwards briefly summarised this contention:

China is already totalitarian in five of the six traits developed by Brzezinski to determine a totalitarian regime. Only with regard to a centrally controlled economy do we find an authoritarian rather than a strict totalitarian structure... But there is no sign that Communist China is becoming more liberal in its ideology, one-party politics, control of the military, censorship of mass communications, use of secret police, and suppression of speech and religion. By any reasonable measure, the PRC is becoming a totalitarian state whose actions are dictated and determined by Xi Jinping and the Communist Party he heads (Edwards, 2020)

This essay agrees with Edwards assessment that China's political system displays significant totalitarian tendencies. However to understand how such a system is able to sustain itself requires a more nuanced understanding of totalitarianism and how it relates to Chinese politics. What really separates totalitarianism from

authoritarianism is that the former seeks a greater degree of popular support, whereas the latter allows civil society a greater degree of autonomy (Bracher, 1981; Greiffenhagen, 1981). The major weakness of using the totalitarian model to conceptualise China's political system is its almost total inability "to account for the less than strictly orderly political life in Communist China, where various political forces have been struggling against each other throughout its history" (Xie, 1993, p.313). There seems to be some undeniable truth in the totalitarian characterization of Chinese politics in terms of the state's control over society and the lack of an autonomous social sphere. However there are "political activities which, though not autonomous in the true sense of the word, are not strictly controlled by the centre" (Xie, 1993, p.314). This is what Weizhi Xie refers to as the 'Semi-hierarchical totalitarian nature' of Chinese politics. Totalitarian in the sense that "there is still no social sphere that is really free from state control and penetration" (Xie, 1993, p.315). However Semi-hierarchical, not in

the sense of factional struggles emphasized by the factional politics model, but that "top leaders often allow lower-level people to take the initiative" (Xie, 1993, p.315). Xie goes on to say that,

lower-level initiative may play important roles in initiating policies, creating issues for high-level power struggles, and challenging existing policies to pioneer the cause of certain leaders. Those who engage in such activities are rewarded or punished depending on political developments (Xie, 1993, pp.315-16)

This falls under the concept of institutionalization - specifically, the "increase in meritocratic as opposed to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites" (Nathan, 2003, p.7), a key method of co-option which maintains Chinese elite support within the system. This is examined in greater detail later on. Having sought to clarify the regime type of China, the following sections now seek to explicate how the regime sustains itself. The fact remains that China's system of governance currently enjoys high levels of legitimacy, both from within the party elites and from its populace. The latter half of this essay seeks to understand why.

## **A critical Review of Classical modernization theory**

“When will China become a democracy? The answer is around the year 2015” said Henry Rowen in 1996 (Rowen, 1996). Unphased by his first misprediction, Rowen doubled down arguing that by 2015, China (in accordance with Freedom House guidelines) would be Partly Free and would be Free by 2025 (Rowen, 2007, 2011). Rowen was not alone – many scholars in the past two decades who used modernization theory as their predictive framework were optimistic about China’s democratisation (Diamond 1999; Gilley, 2004; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Proponents of modernization theory argues that economic development causes democratization (Fukuyama, 1992; Geddes, 2011), sustains existing democracies (Rustow, 1970; Teorell, 2010), or does both (Lipset, 1959). Lipset’s original observation that democracy is related to economic development “has been supported and contested, revised and extended, buried and resuscitated” (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997, p.156). Regardless of which, it is hard to dispute the

positive correlation between economic development and democracy – “one of the most long-standing and established findings in the research of political science” (Zhou, 2020, p.1). So why is it that although “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (Lipset, 1959, p.75), has with China proven to be so incorrect. Although this essay is primarily concerned with how the China’s regime sustains itself, and not necessarily the transition (or lack thereof) to democracy, the two are very much interlinked. Understanding why China has defied modernization theories expectations, provides insight into how China’s system sustains itself.

In 2012, Liu and Chen who were seeking to ‘vindicate’ classical modernization theory’ argued that those who argued for ‘Chinese exceptionalism’ and held the view that the CCP would remain safe as long as the economy continued to grow (performance legitimacy thesis), “overlooked the fact that it is too early to tell whether China has proved or disproved modernisation theory” (Liu and Chen, 2012, p.42). The reasoning

behind this was that states 'most comparable' to China, such as South Korea and Taiwan only embarked on democratization when their PPP (purchasing power parity) per capita GDP (gross domestic product) passed US\$12,221 and US\$14,584 respectively. Based on a moderate estimate of China's growth rate of 7%, Lui and Chen predicted that by 2020 China could reach a PPP per capita GDP of US\$15,000 – and that "only then could a fair judgement be made on whether China is an exception or follows the rule" (Lui and Chen, 2012, p.42). Latest available figures show China's PPP per capita GDP in 2019 at US\$16,804 (World Bank, 2021). Not only has China not shown any signs of democratization, as the previous section highlighted, China has actually shown signs of further regression away from democracy. If one accepts that there is a positive correlation between economic growth and democratization, then one has to concede that in the case of China, other variables must be at play. The next section seek to demonstrate how China is different than the

prior modernizing "third wave" democratizers.

### **Chinese Middle-Class indifference to democracy**

Having highlighted how structural economic conditions have thus far proved inaccurate at predicting Chinese democratization, this next section look at how this broadly accepted view that a rapidly expanding middle class makes democratic reforms essential, is out of step with Chinese attitudes. Chen and Lu (2011) collected data from Beijing, Chengdu and Xi'an in an attempt to capture Chinese middle-class attitudes to democratization. They found that the evidence of support for political freedom among the Chinese middle-class to be "not very strong in either absolute or relative term[s]" (Chen and Lu, 2011, p.708). Only 23% of the middle-class respondents supported the idea of public demonstration as an expression of political freedom -and similarly, only 24% of middle-class respondents thought that citizens should be able to form their own organizations outside the government

(Chen and Lu, 2011, p.708). In terms of support for participatory norms, they found that only a quarter of middle-class respondents “were in favour of participation in the government decision-making process, and less than one-third (28%) believed that ordinary people had any role in initiating political reform” (Chen and Lu, 2011, p.708). So how does one explain the lack of disquiet among the Chinese middle-class even though there is quite clearly a ‘democratic deficit’. This can be explained in part due to the middle-class dependence on the state. China’s authoritarian leaders have “ensured that the middle classes’ future is tied to the Party’s: The CCP has engineered the rise of the middle-class through 35 years of economic reforms and continues to offer public sector salaries to many middle-income Chinese” (Lee, 2008, p.15). Chen and Lu’s research seems to corroborate this view, with their survey indicating that “a majority (about 60%) of middle-class respondent were employed in the state apparatus” (Chen and Lu, 2011, p.713). The result of which is that employed in the

state apparatus “are more likely to identify themselves with the party-state and, hence, less likely to support democracy and democratization” (Chen and Lu, 2011, p.713). Far from an emerging middle class being a force for democratization- in the case of China, the CCP’s co-option of the middle class has made it “a bulwark of the current regime” (Unger, 2006, p.31) not only obfuscating the prospects of democracy, but sustaining regime stability.

### **CCP Institutionalization**

Having examined how the democratizing pressures ‘from below’ due to an emerging middle-class seem not to apply in the case of China, this next section looks to how the China’s system is sustained ‘from above’ through institutionalization. The process of which creates stability within the party elite and prevents factionalism and the potentiality of breakdown. The first aspect of CCP institutionalization is the ‘norm-bound succession politics’ (Nathan, 2003, p.7). Historically, few authoritarian regimes have managed to conduct peaceful, timely,

and stable successions. Referring to Jiang Zemin succession to Hu Jintao, Nathan notes that

“Never before in PRC history has there been a succession whose arrangements were fixed this far in advance, remained so stable to the end, and whose results so unambiguously transferred power from one generation of leaders to another. It is not that factions no longer exist, but that their powers are now in a state of mutual balance and that they have all learned a thing or two from the PRC’s history. Political factions today have neither the power nor, perhaps more importantly, the will to upset rules that have been painfully arrived at. The absence of anyone with supreme power to upset these rules helps make them self-reinforcing” (Nathan, 2003, p.9).

One should point out that with Xi Jinping’s recent consolidation of power, the last sentence of the passage above raises some questions, as to whether President Xi’s consolidation of power might flare factional tensions. Time will ultimately tell whether this effects the stability of China’s system. However the next paragraph examines how a more ‘meritocratic’ appointment procedure has helped ameliorate the factionalized appointment process which has increased internal party stability.

The final aspect of CCP institutionalization this paper examines is the increased meritocratic nature of promotion within the party (Nathan, 2003, p.9). First initiated under Deng Xiaoping in 1980,

“The product of this less factionalized, more regularized process is a competent leadership group that has high morale; that is politically balanced in representing different factions in the Party; that lacks one or two dominant figures, and is thus structurally constrained to make decisions collectively; and that is probably as collegial as any political leadership can be, because all the members came to the top through the same process, which they all view as having been broadly fair” (Nathan, 2003, p.11)

In addition, a norm of “staff neutrality has become to some degree accepted at high levels within the Party Center, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission” (Nathan, 2003, p.11). The result in which was is that the careers of ‘rising stars’ remain relatively unaffected by factional turmoil at the top (Nathan, 2003, p.11). The new system limits the damage that factional strife does to the orderly careers of the rising generation of leaders. The institutionalization of the CCP, which was underway as early as the 1980’s,



indicates the adaptability of China's regime to allow some form of meritocratic promotion within the party. The result is that it reduces the probability of factional disputes and creates a more stable one-party system.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has sought to demonstrate how internal legitimation and co-option factors have helped sustain China's authoritarian system. The implication of this essay is that proponents of democracy should not view it as an inevitability that China will democratize as it continues to modernize. What this essay has attempted to demonstrate is that the past, present and future survival of the CCP, has not only been dependant on impressive sustained economic growth, but has and will continue to depend on making the one-party state broadly responsive to the concerns of its citizens and the ambitions of its factional elites.

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