

Post-Party Governance

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Historically, liberal democracy was born as a means to curb the power of kings and tyrants through mechanisms that would ensure accountability and consent of the governed. A system of checks and balances—two legislative chambers, executive and independent courts—were instituted to ensure power did not become too concentrated.

Today's highly diverse, mass consumer societies, however, have presented another set of challenges. Power is so diffused governance is becoming ineffective. The short-term mentality of voters and the lobbying of special interests undermine the ability of democracies to focus on the long-term and the common interest. Because there are more checks than balances, gridlock has supplanted consensus.

In this section, we compare Chinese and Western systems on their ability to deliver good governance. The editors of the *Economist* magazine put the debate in historical context.

Is China More Democratic Than The US?

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SHANGHAI—After the iron curtain had come down more than two decades ago, many non-western countries got rid of their old political systems and replaced them with Western democracy. Instead of assimilating such foreign systems with their own political cultures, many simply transplanted the presidential system of the United States to their own soil. Back then, it was widely believed that democracy was the “panacea” that would cure all Soviet dysfunctions. And the new democracies would march with the West on a convergent path to the end of history. However, in merely 20 odd years, almost without exception, these new democracies—and to some extent the West itself—have all run into deep structural predicament.

Political stalemate, social malaise, economic stagnation, worsened by the latest global financial crisis, outline a depressing picture of the democratic West. Meanwhile, China has leapfrogged the West to become the world’s second largest economy, and it is projected to overtake the US within the next decade.

How could China, a country that, in as late as 1978, was three times poorer than an average African nation in terms of income per capita, succeed in the Herculean task of poverty reduction and general improvement of living standard for its people, without converting its political institutions to the western orthodox?

This remains a perplexing case to many in the West. The answer lies in China’s social stability. This is a lesson the Chinese learned it the hard way throughout their history. It is also the single most important factor behind the country’s enormous success. A growth-enabling macroeconomic environment is safeguarded by well-maintained social order and stability; which are in turn made possible by mature political institutions.

If one wants to study China seriously, then one can’t just group China among other East Asian authoritarian regimes without any differentiation. Otherwise, it would be a grossly vague and ineffective simplification. While it is true that, to a limited extent, China’s reform resembles earlier reforms in other East Asian economies, they are not the same. In Taiwan and other East Asian countries, authoritarian governments oversaw industrial upgrading; they incentivized and led the transition away from primary to secondary industry as the growth-generating sector.

PRAGMATIC INSTITUTIONS | However, in the case of China, in addition to the sheer size of its population and the abundance of its natural resources,

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the socialist government established pragmatic institutions that encourage learning best practices from around the world. This enabled China to go beyond the East Asian Model.

In 1980, Deng Xiaoping proposed three criteria for judging whether the government of any developing country, particularly China, is legitimate and qualified to govern or not: firstly, can its economic governance put the country on the right track to catch up with the most advanced capitalist economy, namely the US; secondly, can its political governance produce more genuine democracy than the American institutions; and lastly, does the government play well its enabling and facilitative role in grooming ever more talents for the colossal task of modernization?

If one were to follow the antiquated paradigm of autocracy versus democracy and apply such labels to all five generations of Chinese leaders, one would invariably overlook some very crucial facts that are unique features of China's political system. Many in the West still mistake China for a Stalinist totalitarian state. But the truth is, arguably, the distribution of power and accountability within China's "Collective Presidency" is more sophisticated than the separation of power between legislative, executive and judiciary branches in the western political context. As early as in the Republican Period, Sun Yat-sen went beyond the West in terms of checks and balances within political institutions, by envisioning the separation of five powers. And the Communist Party of China (CPC) took an innovative step even further by first dividing and then reintegrating power into "super-institutions", a practice vaguely resembled by the European Union, where the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, and other organizations jointly share power on different fronts.

In a humble effort to illustrate the case of China, I have put together historical experience and lessons since the naissance of the People's Republic in my recent book *Democratic Decision-making: China's Collective Presidency* (China Renmin University Press, March 2014). I want to explain why the collective leadership of seven to nine Politburo Standing Committee members is superior to the system of singular presidency. China did not just stumble upon collective presidency by accident, nor did it happen by random invention. China has gone through laborious processes of innovation, trials and errors, rectification, and institutionalization to become what it is today. I have identified in the book the five major mechanisms of China's collective presidency: collective collaboration, collective power transition, collective self-improvement, collective research, and collective decision-making.

COLLECTIVE COLLABORATION | "The collective wisdom of the masses humbles any individual prodigy"—this time-tested Chinese proverb aptly reflects

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In the Western political context, while the separation of powers effectively prohibits ill usage of authority, it also produces political gridlocks and mutual detachments that prevent ambitious leaders from introducing much needed fundamental reforms. Whereas for China, top leaders and the respective organizations they represent not only facilitate but also supervise each other in a unified system, which gives rise to accountable governance and encourages leaders to do good.

how this ancient civilization traditionally values collectivism. In fact, shortly after the Long March of 1938, the founding fathers of the People's Republic had seen clearly the need for division of responsibilities. In other words, the decentralization of the centralized power. Important issues relating to military, land reform, intelligence, party organization, mobilization and publicity were divided among five members of the Central Secretariat according to individual expertise.

Today, as domestic and international affairs grow ever more complex, there is an increasing need for collaborative governance. For the Chinese top leadership, such collaboration manifests on multiple levels: firstly, most Politburo Standing Committee members have assistant roles to play apart from his major area of responsibility; secondly, Politburo members are each in charge of different policymaking organizations which exchange information on a regular basis, and brief the top leaders on matters of strategic importance; thirdly, a plethora of internal think tanks, in collaboration and competition with each other, form the brain of CPC central leadership, and serve as essential means to gather intelligence and advise on policies.

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COLLECTIVE POWER TRANSITION | Frequently dubbed as opaque by western media, leadership transition is one of the most misread modus operandi in Chinese politics. In nearly half a century's time, China abolished personal appointment of heirs, and moved to a system of collectively selecting, evaluating, and grooming future leaders.

An important factor differentiating China from the West is that Chinese leaders compete on meritocratic basis alone, unlike their Western counterparts whose ascendance is dependent upon the merits of election campaigns rather than performance assessment. In electoral democracies, political parties literally represent various partial interests, and the right for any party to hold office is directly derived from winning periodical elections. In the case of the CPC's, however, the Party is not meant to be "partial," it represents the interest of the mass majority in society. Legitimacy for a CPC leader comes from performance and solid track record. It would be unthinkable to have an incompetent leader with scant experience in public affairs, such as the likes of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, running the government.

There are at least two major meritocratic thresholds that any mid-level CPC

cadre must meet before they can move into the Party's top echelon. First, they must have served at the level of provincial Party leader. In a way, these positions represent an elite training program for governance and public administration that few countries can offer. In a prolonged, competitive, and stringent process, capable candidates must tackle all kinds of regional/sectoral challenges. They need to keep themselves well informed and have various resources ready at their fingertips at all times. They need to be able to consistently demonstrate that they have what it takes to lead the world's most populous country to an even better future. Put it bluntly, only the best and fittest survive, the rest would retire. For example, Meng Jianzhu, now a central government high-ranking Party official, began his career as a county Party Secretary and then Vice Mayor of Shanghai. Subsequently, he headed the provincial government and Party Committee of Jiangxi, a province in eastern China with over 45 million people and a GDP equivalent to that of Pakistan, before he was able to serve on the Central Committee of Political and Legislative Affairs.

Once a member of the Central Committee, a second threshold is for a potential future leader to demonstrate that he or she has the tenacity and commitment to make their way to the top. They need to serve as alternate members of Politburo Standing Committee for several years. In this preparatory phase, current leaders would put these candidates to tests, and screen the most competent and well disciplined for subsequent collective power transition.

Since the CPC is meant to be a guardian, if not the only guardian, of the overall interest of the Chinese people; the Party bears the ultimate responsibility for the betterment of the country, the nation, and the state. For obvious reasons, transition of such leadership must be handled with care. Such collective mechanism not only keeps potential dictators at bay, but also prevents the likes of Gorbachev from taking power in China and undoing China's great achievements so far.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING | The CPC has a long tradition in collective learning, a multi-faceted practice that entails expert consulting, information-sharing, international exchange, and learning from best practices. Without exception, generations of Chinese leaders all called attention to continuous learning. In 2003, collective learning became a codified practice in the Second Plenum of 16th Central Committee.

The Politburo regularly and frequently organizes lectures, seminars, symposiums, where Standing Committee members would consult top Chinese minds on matters of economic and social importance. Through this mechanism, constructive interaction between various decision-making and policy-consulting bodies would help the central government take fitting actions on even the most delicate issues.

In my capacity as a professor at Tsinghua University, I teach high-level cadres cus-

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On average, the current members of Central Politburo Standing Committee each have 43.6 years of experience in civil service, and 38.9 years of Party membership. Born in 1953, President Xi Jinping, for instance, joined the civil service in 1969, and joined the CPC in 1974—that adds up to more than four decades of learning and experience in public administration, organization and management.

tomized courses on contemporary China studies and China's reform. Such courses were first offered in Central Party School and Chinese Academy of Governance; top Chinese Universities soon followed. Today, collective learning has already become a highly institutionalized mechanism with broad participation.

To be sure, CPC officials learn far beyond from books and in classrooms, from their rotational career postings through different sectors, namely Party Committee, State-Owned Enterprises, and other social organizations. On average, the current members of Central Politburo Standing Committee each have 43.6 years of experience in civil service, and 38.9 years of Party membership. Born in 1953, President Xi Jinping, for instance, joined the civil service in 1969, and joined the CPC in 1974—that adds up to more than four decades of learning and experience in public administration, organization and management.

COLLECTIVE RESEARCH | “He who carries out no research and investigation shouldn't be entitled to his opinions,” said Mao Zedong in 1930.

Having adequate and relevant information is the foundation to any successful public policy making. This is particularly true for China, a country with vast territory and the world's largest population. It is extremely unlikely that any individual would possess well-rounded and in-depth knowledge on all aspects of society. Therefore, no one, however capable, could act appropriately on such gross information deficit. In the case of Chinese collective presidency, each member of the Politburo Standing Committee stays well informed by a good number of subcommittees, internal research institutes and independent think-tanks in various fields. At the same time, they also conduct plenty primary research and investigations. Such effort not only strengthens local implementation of central government's policies, but also provides preventive measures to deal with contingencies, such as natural disasters and social hazards.

Once an export-driven economy with complex domestic disparity, China was highly susceptible to external shocks from the international economic environment. It requires tremendous amount of knowledge and prudence to devise macro-level policies for the whole nation. When the latest financial crisis hit the world in 2008, while many governments were either gridlocked on the effective cause of action or taken by surprise due to internal unpreparedness. In China all nine members of the 17th Politburo Standing Committee promptly conducted field investigations and soon reached unanimous decision on the launch of a timely 4 trillion yuan stimulus package to boost the economy. This highly institutionalized collective decision-making process can effectively prepare China for any possible challenges that arise externally.

In the latest edition of China's Collective Presidency, I attached a chronological record showing in detail that by the end of 2013, how President Xi spent nearly 10

percent of his time on 14 inspection trips that covered one third of China's provinces and all seven military regions. Prior to the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee meeting of the CPC, topics such as rural land reform were most controversially debated. In order to have a better understanding on those key issues, in addition to official reports, Xi Jinping purposefully visited farmers in Hubei province and gathered firsthand information from the grassroots level.

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING | After more than six decades of ups and downs, it is increasingly clear to Beijing that making the right strategic decision is the greatest success, and failing to do so would result in national calamity. In fact, China had learned its lessons from the chaotic late years of Mao—If China had stood firmly against Mao's personal leadership and held on to collective decision-making mechanism from 1958 to 1976, as it had during the civil war and in the first decade of communist rule, catastrophic movements such as the Cultural Revolution could have largely been prevented.

A common hindrance to efficient decision-making and good governance stems from the asymmetry of power. The loss and restoration of balance in China's political power structure explain respectively Mao's failure and Deng's success. After seeing Mao's grave mistakes, Deng Xiaoping openly stressed in 1980 that "important issues must be discussed collectively; each Party committee member should be entitled to one vote, and decision-making should strictly follow the rule of majority."

Contrary to western stereotypical views on China's democratic centralism, democratic procedures from information exchange to consensus seeking are in fact the backbones and lifeblood of the country's collective decision-making.

With more than 85 million members, the Communist Party of China is the world's largest ruling entity. It has seen the struggles and ambitions of earlier regimes, and explored on itself various institutional possibilities over the course of its history. China is a civilization with profound regional differences. Only collective presidency is able to capture such diverse interests of the Chinese people, and coordinate among different levels of the government to strike a balance between the Party and the state. It takes collective presidency to unify and mobilize social forces on all fronts, and continuously propel the nation forward.



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