

ALSO BY MARK LEONARD

Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century

MARK LEONARD

WHAT DOES CHINA THINK?



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while my PA Katherine Parkes was a tower of strength throughout our eventful launch period.

Zhang Feng was a model research assistant and sounding board, ferreting out material, translating multiple articles and books, and keeping me in touch with the hottest ideas in Chinese academia and policy circles.

Three people introduced me to China on my very first trip and have been my guides ever since. Joshua Ramo, a soul-mate and inspiration, first got me hooked when he allowed me to publish his brilliant paper on the 'Beijing Consensus' when I was running the Foreign Policy Centre. He has been incredibly generous with his precious time, contacts, and ideas. Poppy Sebag-Montefiore made China trips fun as well as interesting. More than anyone else, she gave me an insight into everyday China, introducing me to her incredible friends, and letting me stay whenever I needed in her Beijing apartment. Andrew Small has been a true partner in crime, accompanying me to remote backwaters in the Chinese countryside, feeding me with reading materials on a bewildering array of topics, reading all my drafts, and helping me make sense of a whole new world.

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Mark Leonard, November 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Liberation of Thought

China's very existence creates a problem for Western accounts of world history. The Bible didn't say anything about China. Hegel saw world history starting with primitive China and ending in a crescendo of perfection with German civilization. Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis simply replaces Germany with America. But suddenly the West has discovered that in the East there is this China: a large empire, with a long history and glorious past. A whole new world has emerged.

Gan Yang, *'The Grand Three Traditions in the New Era: The Integration of the Three Traditions and the Re-emergence of the Chinese Civilization'*

Very few things that happen during my lifetime will be remembered after I am dead. Even 9/11 or the Iraq War – events which transfixed us, took innocent lives and decided elections – will gradually fade until they become mere footnotes in the history books. But China's rise is different: it is the big story of our age and its after-effects could echo down generations to come. Like the rise and fall of Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the British Raj or the Soviet Union, it is the stuff from which grand narratives are wrought. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, a non-Western power is in the global premier league: China has

joined the United States and Europe as a shaper of world order.

China's scale is mesmerizing; its vital statistics are almost impossible for us to grasp. With one in five of the world's population, China's entrance into the global market place has almost doubled the world's workforce. Already, half of the world's clothes and footwear have a 'Made in China' label in them, and China produces more computers than anywhere else in the world. China's voracious appetite for resources is gobbling up 40 per cent of the world's cement, 40 per cent of its coal, 30 per cent of its steel and 12 per cent of its energy. China has become so integrated into the global economy that its prospects have immediate effects on our everyday lives: simultaneously doubling the cost of petrol while halving the cost of our computers, keeping the US economy afloat but sinking the Italian footwear industry.

The speed at which this is happening is even more shocking. Building construction in Shanghai takes place at such a breakneck pace that the city's maps need to be rewritten every two weeks. A town the size of London shoots up in the Pearl River Delta every year. In the run-up to the Olympics, China is building enough new roads to go four times around the world. China has brought 300 million people from agricultural backwardness into modernity in just thirty years – a process of industrialization that took over 200 years in Europe. If current growth trends continue – which is admittedly a big 'if' – the People's Republic could overtake the USA to become the world's biggest economy well before 2050.

But this focus on scale, speed and measurable statistics is blinding us to a deeper question: will China's rise change the nature of our world? We are getting used to China's growing influence on the world economy – but could it also reshape our ideas about politics and power? China is the first country since the end of the Cold War with the ingenuity, scale and global exposure to shape the world in its image. Its gargantuan domestic problems

are driving it to seek a new model of globalization. And its huge size means that other economies and nations connected to it – from America to Zimbabwe – will need to reformat their own systems to cope with China's new ideas about economic development, political reform and world order. China is starting to think for itself. And, because of its stunning economic record, people around the world are starting to listen, and copy the Chinese model.

This story of China's intellectual awakening is much less well documented than the now familiar tale of China's economic revival. Although we obsessively study the ideas of different factions in America's intellectual life – the Neo-Cons, the assertive realists, the religious right – how many of us can name more than a handful of contemporary Chinese writers or thinkers? Who knows what future they dream of for their country, or the world it is shaping? Europeans and Americans, in particular, are ill-equipped to answer these questions. Since the time when French and British missionaries first travelled to the East, the West has focused on what it wanted from China – and how to convert the Chinese to a Western way of life. People wrongly assumed that as China grew richer, it would also become more like us.

The accidental sinologist

China crept up on us slowly in the 1990s. For most of that decade, it was the preserve of regional specialists or fantasists from the business world who dreamt of making vast fortunes, but usually lost even more. However, at some indeterminate point around the turn of the millennium, China stopped being a subject for specialists. From my vantage point as director of a foreign policy think-tank in London, I remember noticing how – all of a sudden – almost every global challenge had acquired a Chinese dimen-

sion: from African development to the reform of the United Nations system, the Doha global trade talks to the Iranian nuclear programme, genocide in Darfur to oil prices in Venezuela. China was no longer a big country with which one could choose to enjoy trading or diplomatic relationships; instead it was starting to become part of the furniture of global politics, a universal factor with which we are forced to contend. In terms of political influence China had stopped being like other large developing countries such as India or Brazil. It was turning into something quite new: a miniature USA. I suddenly knew that without understanding China, it would be impossible to understand world politics.

I will never forget my first visit to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing. I was welcomed by Wang Luolin, the academy's vice-president (whose grandfather had translated Marx's *Das Kapital* into Chinese), and Huang Ping (a former Red Guard who was then co-editor of the intellectual journal *Dushu*). Sitting in oversized armchairs – arranged in parallel against the wall in order to protect the backs of the hosts and guest of honour from enemy attacks – we sipped ceremonial tea and introduced ourselves. 'The Foreign Policy Centre,' I began, 'is four years old. We have around twenty staff, we publish twenty-five policy reports a year and host around fifty seminars.' Wang Luolin nodded politely and smiled before delivering his killer blow: 'CASS is the highest academic research organization in the fields of philosophy and social sciences. We have fifty research centres that cover 260 disciplines and sub-disciplines, and 4,000 full-time researchers.' As he said the words, I could feel myself shrink into the seams of my vast chair: Britain's entire think-tank community is numbered in the hundreds; Europe's in the low thousands; even the think-tank heaven of the USA cannot have more than 10,000. But here in China, a single institution – and there are

another dozen or so other think-tanks in Beijing alone – had 4,000 researchers. I discovered later that even people at CASS think that many of these researchers are not up to scratch, but the raw figures were enough to intimidate me in that early meeting.

Wang Luolin's one-upmanship on size was just the beginning of a well-worn strategy designed to bewilder and co-opt outsiders. We spent many hours engaged in polite conversation without touching on the specifics of our co-operation. These elaborate courtship rituals, seemingly devoid of substance or direction, have been honed over centuries to nullify Western negotiating strategies, and bind foreigners into Chinese ways of doing things, creating webs based on personal contact rather than contractual obligations. At the beginning of the trip, I had hoped to get a quick introduction to China, learn the basics, and go home. But after spending what felt like weeks in these introductory meetings, sitting around sipping tea and exchanging pleasantries I ended up getting sucked in.

I had stumbled on a hidden world of intellectuals, think-tankers and activists who were thinking big thoughts. I soon realized that it would take more than a few visits to Beijing and Shanghai to grasp the scale and ambition of China's internal debates. My mind was made up – I wanted to devote the next few years of my life to understanding these radical developments; to document the living history that was unfolding before me. I became, so to speak, an accidental sinologist, visiting Beijing so frequently that it began to feel like a second home. And, with each visit, my entanglement with China's fate grew deeper. I became friendly with many of China's new thinkers and watched their theories develop over time, evolving in tandem with the breathtaking changes to their country. I saw them take Western ideas and adapt them into a new Chinese approach for dealing with the world – joining an intellectual journey that China began when it first became entangled with the West in the nineteenth century.

the sequencing of reform – should economic follow political reform, or should it be the other way around? But today they argue about what the ultimate destination should be. Reform is seen less through the prism of human rights and freedom, than the question of how to increase the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party. Instead of trying to develop a Chinese variant of liberal democracy, many intellectuals are looking for a different model altogether.

Democracy = chaos

'You talk about democracy as if it were a religion which needs to be spread around the world. But elections will not solve any of the problems facing China today.' This is how Pan Wei, a rising star at Beijing University, greeted me at our first meeting, castigating me for paying so much attention to the experiments in grass-roots democracy that have sprung up around China. 'The Sichuan experiment will go nowhere,' he says, 'the local leaders have their personal political goal: they want to make their names known. But the experiment has not succeeded. In fact, Sichuan is the place with the highest number of mass protests. Very few other places want to emulate them.'

Unfortunately Pan Wei is probably right. In the 1980s and 1990s many scholars argued that democracy was the necessary prerequisite for wider political and economic progress. In particular, it was seen by many as a precondition for growth. But in recent years – not least because of China's own economic success – this link has been increasingly questioned. It is this instrumental view of democracy – as a route to prosperity or political stability rather than a goal in itself – which allows Pan Wei to attack it head on. He argues that elections will not fix any of China's most pressing

problems: the rise in protests, the gap between rich and poor, the near bankruptcy of the rural economy, the lack of domestic consumption, or the pervasive corruption of the political elite. In fact, Pan Wei thinks that democracy would actually make things worse: 'The more electorates politicians want to reach, the more money they need. There are always rich people who want to provide money in exchange for some government support. Therefore, once elected, the public officers are to serve electors on the one hand and money providers on the other.' The pressing issue for most people, he says, is not 'who should run the government?', but 'how should the government be run?' He argues that political reform should flow from social problems rather than universal or Western principles.

Most theorists of democracy would not accept Pan Wei's attempt to separate how a government is run from how its leaders are selected: the former is very much a product of the latter. And the legitimacy that comes from elections would strengthen any government that tried to deal with China's problems – domestically and internationally. However, Pan Wei's aversion to democracy seems to have deeper roots than intellectual arguments. He claims that democracy conjures up three of the most painful images in the Chinese psyche: the collapse of the former Soviet Union which followed Gorbachev's political liberalization; the so-called 'people's democracy' of China's own Cultural Revolution; and the risk of an independent Taiwan.

The Soviet Union provided a blueprint for Mao as he set about creating a socialist state in China. The institutions of government, the slogans and the iconography were imported wholesale and given only the slightest Chinese characteristics. During the Cold War, Russia always had a technological edge over China and seemed destined to continue to be the People's Republic's bigger brother for eternity. In 1991, it was exposed as a paper tiger. When

Gorbachev was ejected from power the Soviet empire dissolved into its constituent parts, mafia capitalism shared out the spoils of the economy and the country's GDP was halved. The Chinese ruling elite are in no doubt about why this happened: the mistake of embracing political reform before the economy had been liberalized. They have vowed not to make the same mistake.

Even more painful is the memory of the Cultural Revolution. Launched by Mao in 1966, this attempt to purge China of its bourgeois elements plunged the country into a decade of violent chaos, crippling its economy, destroying its social infrastructure and killing at least half a million people. Many of today's intellectuals spent those years in the countryside – down mines, in factories, or on farms – robbed of their childhood and their educations. Recently I had dinner with a leading Chinese public intellectual who is liberal by inclination and educated in the West, but – because of his experiences of the Cultural Revolution – terrified of the consequences of democracy. His account of his experiences is all too typical for his generation:

I was very idealistic when I was young... I wanted to be a noble revolutionary. I went to the countryside and spent ten years doing hard labour in a factory. I did really dirty jobs, risking my life. Sometimes I had ten blisters on my hands. I thought the peasants were masters of history, that they were noble and that we should reform ourselves to be like them (I came from a family of intellectuals). But I found that they are just human like the rest of us. I saw groups of pupils torturing their teachers to death to punish them for giving them bad marks. I had to organize classmates to protect our own teachers from attacks. If you loosen up and open the box, the people will become an uncontrollable mob. So the only hope is top-down reform. This is very difficult but it is

possible. In England during the Glorious Revolution and Victorian times there were powerful vested interests, but they realized that reform was in their long-term interests.

Pan Wei, too, fears that elections would let the genie out of the bottle again – pitting impoverished peasants against the country's growing middle class, and causing the country to dissolve into its constituent parts: 'In China, class struggle in the 1960s and 70s turned out to be a Hobbesian war of all against all. None of the involved parties respected or accepted any legal procedure, and the losers would not gracefully accept their failure but fought to the bloody end.'

It is, however, Taiwan which brings out Pan Wei's most colourful language. This island, which China views as a breakaway province, was run under autocratic rule by the anti-Communist Kuomintang for almost fifty years before holding its first free Presidential elections in 1996, thereby showing that Chinese culture and democracy are compatible. But against the evidence, Pan Wei repeatedly represents the country as an economic and political basket-case, brought to its knees by these very elections. He talks about recent corruption scandals involving President Chen Shui-Bian and his family, about how China is rapidly catching up with its neighbour in economic terms, and about the heavily personalized, tabloid politics of this young democracy. He claims that it is democracy that has driven the creation of a Taiwanese national identity. What makes the Chinese so neurotic about Taiwan's political system is the correct assessment that the Taiwanese would vote for independence were they not living under the Damoclean sword of a Chinese military threat. And what is true of Taiwan could turn out to be true of each of the other Chinese minorities. Would Tibetans vote for independence? What about the Uighurs of Xinjiang? China, like the former Soviet

hand for President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and the Politburo) invited him to make a presentation at the government's headquarters in Zhongnanhai. And the experiment is being emulated in other cities around China.

Chongqing is a whopper of a city. Its bewildering scale – even by China's standards 30 million inhabitants is impressive – gives its experiments with public consultation national significance. However, the real potential for public consultation – as an alternative to elections – can best be gleaned from smaller-scale experiments in the more prosperous parts of China. The most interesting one was carried out in the township of Zeguo in Wenling City, which is situated in the wealthy eastern province of Zhejiang.

What made the Zeguo consultation unique – not just in China but in the world – was the fact that it used a novel technique called 'deliberative polling' to decide on major spending decisions. This method, the brainchild of a Stanford political scientist called James Fishkin, is designed to help policy-makers consult their citizens: 'It harks back to a form of democracy quite different from modern western style party competition – Ancient Athens. In Athens, deliberative microcosms chosen by lot would make important public decisions as part of the official operations of the government.'

Deliberative polling is designed to solve a dilemma which authorities like Chongqing or Zeguo inevitably face. On the one hand, if they organize a consultation like the ones in Chongqing, only the most vocal people will turn up. They tend to represent their own interests, and are not necessarily representative of their fellow citizens. On the other hand, if Chongqing tried to consult the population directly through opinion polls, they would find that citizens knew very little about the details of particular public policy questions. As a result, they would often

choose options at random, rather than ticking the 'don't know' box in a questionnaire. Deliberative polling tries to solve this conundrum by randomly selecting a sample of the population but then involving them in a consultation process with experts, before asking them to vote on their decisions. Zeguo used this technique to decide how to spend its 40 million Yuan 'public works' budget. Two hundred and seventy-five people – chosen at random – were invited to take part in a charmingly named 'democratic heart-to-heart talk'. In exchange for a free bus-pass and 50 RMB (£3.30), these citizens agreed to spend a day being briefed on the pros and cons of thirty potential building projects – from sewage plants and parks to roads and a new town square. At the end of the day, they were asked to whittle the wish-list down to twelve projects that the government could actually afford to build. Their wish-list was then presented to the local People's Congress which voted the plan through in its entirety.

So far the Zeguo experiment is a one-off, but Fishkin and the Chinese political scientist He Baogang, who advised the Zeguo government on the mechanics of the consultation, believe that 'deliberative democracy' could provide a template for political reform in China: 'It shows how governments, without party competition or the conventional institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West, can nevertheless realize, to a high degree, two fundamental democratic values at the same time – political equality and deliberation.'

Rule of law or rule by man?

There has been less conspicuous progress on other democratic values such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, or even the one that Pan Wei has promoted so vigorously, the rule of

law. Over the centuries, petitions to the powerful have become a surrogate for due legal processes in China – a pattern that harks back to imperial times, but is still very much in vogue. When I walked back from my meeting with Li Dianxun in the Chongqing government offices in 2006, I stumbled upon a Mrs Wang. She was dressed in her Sunday best – a tailored jacket and skirt, shiny shoes and a touch of lipstick – because she wanted to make the right impression. She told me that she had got up early – as she does every day – to catch the officials on their way into the Chongqing Municipal Affairs Office. She was part of a small throng – all elderly and smartly dressed – that was standing opposite the building's gates. Most were former broadcasters who – after working for the party for thirty years – were laid off with only 4,000 renminbi in compensation. They were asking for more money for themselves and an 'old age foundation' to pay a fair reward to all pensioners. They clutched their tattered 'files', showing me the official stamps that signal their complaint has been lodged. Some of them had been seeking redress for four years, coming regularly to demonstrate outside the municipality's office. Mrs Wang, herself, has been to Beijing three times to present her petition to the central government. But there was no response to her or the other protesters' complaints. The authorities seemed immune to the low murmur of protest outside their offices.

Mrs Wang's demonstration was just one of the 250 demonstrations that took place in China on that very day. Statistics from the Ministry of Public Security show that these so-called 'mass incidents' – which include strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, traffic-blocking and building seizures – have grown ten-fold in just over a decade: from 8,700 a year in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005. The numbers of demonstrators have grown too: from an average of ten protesters in the mid 1990s to over fifty today. In the first half

of 2005, there were seventeen that involved more than 10,000 people. Not all of them were peaceful and good-natured. In the first half of 2005, 1,700 people were injured and 100 killed in these organized demonstrations. All of the demonstrations are triggered by feelings of injustice: for better working conditions, unpaid wages and pensions, and compensation. A report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences showed that 40 million peasants had had their land confiscated to build airports, roads, dams, factories and for private land deals. Every year, a further 2 million people will lose their homes and lands to make way for new developments (in deals that often see local party bosses lining their pockets at their expense).

In a country whose political system is ruled according to the whims of party officials, these incidents are too often resolved on the streets. However, it is the fear of instability that is leading the theorists of 'deliberative dictatorship' to look beyond the system of petitioning which Chinese people have used to vent their grievances since imperial times. Pan Wei urges China to trade its corrupt and unpredictable 'rule by man' for the 'rule of law'. He hopes that China will do this by separating politics from government and establishing a truly independent civil service, judiciary and anti-corruption agency. But when pressed how these revolutionary changes could happen, Pan Wei is much less sure-footed.

There is still a long way for China to go before it develops the rule of law – and Pan Wei's vision will certainly not be realized so long as the Communist Party remains above the law. However, Pan Wei can point to some progress. China is one of the only one-party states to allow citizens to sue the state in court. The number of law suits of citizens against the government has increased from 10,000 five years ago to 100,000 last year. And the rate at which citizens win cases against the government has also changed dramatically –

from single digits to over 40 per cent. According to Pan Wei, the quality of the proceedings is slowly improving: 'Fifteen years ago most of the judges were retired officials or military officers. Today they all have legal training.'

The government seems to realize that developing institutional ways of dealing with grievances can make the state more stable. If there is a system of legal redress, citizens can be compensated for ills rather than punished for dissent. This is in line with the authorities' so-called 'flexible approach' of conceding legitimate complaints from ordinary people, while punishing the ring-leaders. The senior leadership has already intervened several times in high-profile cases. For example, in April 2005, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao personally intervened to stop the construction of a dam in the Nuijiang River; in Zhejiang, workers were allowed to negotiate collectively with their employers; in Yinchuan, a cab strike ended with an unusual compromise with the government. So far, the protests have been isolated local events – and President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao have managed to deflect criticism on to 'corrupt local authorities', thereby allowing themselves to take the side of the 'little guy'. But this may prove more challenging in the long run.

Whose rule of law?

The debate about political reform – like the one about economics – sometimes pits the 'New Left' against the 'New Right'. Although some members of the 'New Right' are convinced democrats, many are more focused on promoting the rule of law, to reduce the size of the state and restrict its impact on the market. On the Left there is more support for elections as a way of endowing the government with enough legitimacy to take on vested interests

and redistribute wealth. They fear deliberative dictatorship would lead to an impoverished, consumerist model of politics.

The 'New Leftist' Wang Hui argues that it will be impossible to develop the 'New Left' agenda without wider political reform, because China's new rich have a stranglehold on politics. 'You need democracy in order to empower the state to take money from special interests to pay for public goods. In the 1990s there was a dichotomy between a free market and an authoritarian state. People thought that the economic reforms were working and that we could reform the state later. Now we see that many of the problems we are facing are a product of economic reforms and we need political reform to correct them.'

Pan Wei, whose political sympathies are closer to the 'New Right', admits that his attachment to the 'rule of law' reflects his pro-market agenda: 'democracy is rooted in the belief in the eventual election of "good" leaders... rule of law is rooted in the disbelief of "persons", it trusts no one who holds power'. The central feature of Pan Wei's model, therefore, would be a very small government. Its main role would be enforcing rather than producing laws, because the checks and balances would deliberately make it very hard to pass any laws.

Wang Hui, on the other hand, argues that the 'rule of law' is meaningless without democracy. Every year, he says, the people's congresses pass hundreds of laws that have no impact at all: 'We are all for the rule of law,' he says, 'but whose laws will be listened to? Compare labour law and intellectual property. Both laws have been on the table for a decade, but on labour law nothing has happened, while on intellectual property everything is happening. Without popular participation, only the interests of capital will be listened to.' In fact, it is precisely because the affluent middle classes fear their assets could be appropriated by the masses that they are lukewarm about democracy.

crude intimidation does not change the flow of information in and out of the country. Burma, Iran, Vietnam and Tunisia have tried to build a wall around their countries, but their protection is more like a sieve than a barrier. Saudi Arabia has had more success, bringing all traffic on to a single internet provider and screening out sites that offend its clerics with a web-link that describes the content as 'un-Islamic'. China is sixty times the size of Saudi Arabia, and most experts agreed that the sheer volume of traffic would be impossible to police. However, Beijing has risen to the challenge, throwing people, money and technology at the problem. The more lurid accounts talk of an e-police force of 100,000 people employed to scour the net, blocking sites and checking e-mails. The numbers are probably exaggerated, but analysts agree that teams of computer scientists run a firewall with at least four different kinds of filter.

Much of the commentary about this censorship suggests that China is an iron-clad Stalinist state, shielded from global events by the 'great firewall of China'. However, analogies with Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1980s are misleading. The governments of the Soviet bloc looked on powerlessly as their grey world of propaganda was eclipsed by Technicolor images of a better life in the West. China, on the other hand, is already part of the capitalist world. It is awash with information, products and all the baubles of consumer society. With every year that passes, the number of people with access to these goodies grows.

China's interference is very tightly targeted on issues that could undermine the regime. Internet providers mainly censor the perennial political taboos: articles on Tibet, Taiwan, Tiananmen Square and the Falun Gong religious sect as well as pieces criticizing the Communist Party's rule. This kind of censorship is not aimed at shutting China off from the world, but rather at zeroing in on political controversy. Google, for example, estimates that less

than 2 per cent of internet searches will be affected by censorship.

The authorities are less worried about information coming in from outside than they are about Chinese people talking to one another. China's laws on the freedom of assembly are draconian. Charities, trade unions and religious groups are kept under close surveillance and regularly banned. The ferocity with which the Communist Party suppresses the herbivorous and mild-mannered Falun Gong has puzzled many outside observers. But Beijing is not afraid of the content of their meetings; it is afraid of them meeting at all. China's history of revolutions organized by secret societies and religious sects has taught the government to be careful. Its greatest fear is that, in a country where political gatherings are restricted, the net could provide a virtual meeting place for the masses to organize.

The great firewall is full of leaks. For example, when the dissident blogger Michael Anti's site was shut down, its content was copied and distributed across the net. Many Chinese take refuge in the world of digital images, which can be sent between mobiles or e-mailed as attachments, escaping the filters of the censor. Others write to each other in coded language using stories as allegories on message boards. But so far the government has been adept at keeping up with technology – and using it to advance its own agenda.

Is deliberative dictatorship a real alternative?

The big questions are whether the Communist Party can continue adapting, and whether deliberative dictatorship can prove a robust alternative to liberal democracy? Certainly, the authorities seem willing to experiment with all kinds of political innovations. In

Pingchang, they have been willing to introduce greater democracy within the party. In Chongqing, they have given up a certain amount of judicial power and allowed public voices to be heard. In Zeguo, they have introduced a form of government by focus group. The main criterion guiding political reform seems to be that it must not threaten the Communist Party's monopoly on power. You could call it 'Anything but National Elections'.

Can a more responsive form of authoritarianism evolve into a legitimate and stable form of government? The reason that the Soviet planned economy collapsed is that its planners were unable to gather enough information to allocate resources efficiently, and motivate people to maximize the creation of wealth. The conventional wisdom is that as societies become more complex, with more and more interest groups clashing with each other, the planned political system will suffer from the same inefficiencies. But could new technology give leaders access to perfect information? It is possible to imagine that polling, internet consultations and public hearings could allow the authorities in Beijing to keep abreast of the public mood.

As China becomes more complex – and the interests of the poor clash with those of the new rich; urban dwellers with those of the countryside; shareholders with employees – it will be impossible to please all of the people all of the time. In these circumstances it will not be enough to make the right decisions – governments need to be seen to have made them in a legitimate way so that the losers accept them as well as the winners. Elections can give that legitimacy because everyone takes part in them. However, will deliberative polls such as the one in Zeguo (where only 275 people out of 120,000 citizens take part) be seen as legitimate?

In the long term, China's one-party state may well collapse. However, in the medium term, the regime seems to be developing

increasingly sophisticated techniques to prolong its survival and pre-empt discontent. One of the reasons why it seems to be so resilient is its mixture of pragmatism and responsiveness. The Chinese government is, in some ways, its own sternest critic. It constantly commissions and researches its own vulnerabilities. In fact, whenever Western scholars write reports on the impending collapse of China's one-party state they seem to draw on studies commissioned by the state itself. And when the Communist regime looks for mechanisms to entrench its power, it takes as much inspiration from the practices of advanced democracies as other autocracies. China has already changed the terms of the debate about globalization by proving that authoritarian regimes can deliver economic growth. In the future, its model of deliberative dictatorship could prove that one-party states can deliver stability as well.