“[t]hat statement contained within it a profound historical lesson that we learned from the Soviet collapse, namely that if we do not . . . prevent and overcome the threat of legitimacy crisis, living only by the old dictum that ‘anyone can rule by force alone’ then it is not inconceivable that we will follow the same path as the Soviet Union.”

Right to Rule:
Legitimacy and Popular Will in Contemporary China

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April, 2016
This work would not have been possible without the help of numerous professors at Haverford and Bryn Mawr. Their advice, knowledge, and encouragement has been invaluable. I would like to give special thanks to my advisor, Craig Borowiak, who so many times has asked the perfect question to give me insight or spur me on.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

For decades, the Chinese Communist Party has been resting its legitimacy on the basis of sustained economic growth. This promise of material prosperity allowed the CCP to rebuild its image among the people following the chaos the Cultural Revolution. It even enabled Beijing to endure the Tiananmen Square protests and the rapid social changes caused by economic liberalization. Now, it has become clear that the boom years are ending, China’s growth is slowing down, and the CCP is taking steps to find other sources of legitimacy. First, it began reviving official support for the revival of traditional Confucian rhetoric. Then, more recently, it has been increasing its assertiveness in territorial disputes with maritime neighbors. But will it be successful, and why is it choosing to focus on the double-edged sword of nationalism and the once-maligned traditional philosophies of pre-Communist China? And why was it quicker to adopt the culturalist policies of Confucianism than nationalist legitimation tactics? In this paper, I will argue that contemporary scholarship has neglected the role of the Chinese people themselves in setting the terms by which the CCP is legitimated. It is the disposition of the Chinese people and their relationship with their government that the answer to these questions can be found.

Literature Review:

Before delving into the specifics of the situation that the Chinese Communist Party faces today, it is important to establish how legitimacy and the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy in particular have been viewed by the scholarly community. In this literature review, I will start at the most broad level: how has legitimacy been generally conceived to function. Next, I will cover the work that has attempted to apply Weberian and other concepts of legitimacy in the context of Soviet-style one-party states. Finally, I will discuss the scholarly debate on the
Chinese Communist Party’s methods of legitimation. I believe that this literature review will show that there is a gap in the current body of scholarly work: there is little discussion of why the modern CCP is choosing to shift its legitimation methods towards nationalism and culturalism in particular.

**What is Legitimacy?**

Max Weber’s shadow looms tall over all subsequent work in the field of legitimacy. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, he argued the there were three ways a state could legitimate itself. First is legal-rational legitimation, a “belief in the ‘legality’ of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.”¹ As Robert Weatherley emphasizes, an established procedure is key; the rulers must adhere to the clearly-defined and transparent rules of the system for people to accept their authority.² The competitive elections of Western-style democracies are often viewed as the exemplary examples of this form of legitimation.³ The next type of Weberian legitimacy is charismatic legitimacy, in which a single person convinces the masses that they possess the unique capacity to lead, either through divine authority or possession of some unique talent or knowledge. By definition, charismatic legitimacy is transient; it cannot survive the loss of the single figure. Finally, the third type of Weberian legitimation is traditional legitimacy. The ruling elite appeals to ‘the way things always have been done.’ Weatherley describes it in a very Burkeian fashion, whereby “governance techniques are accepted on the grounds that they embody the accumulated wisdom of successive generations of leaders.”⁴

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¹ Weber, 328
² Weatherley, 6
³ White, 1986.
⁴ Weatherley, 9
One other key scholar who is often brought up when discussing legitimacy, especially by those focusing on China, is David Beetham. In *The Legitimation of Power*, Beetham sets out to challenge Weber’s definition of legitimacy. He describes Weberian legitimacy theory as having been “an almost unqualified disaster,” because it has led social scientists to look at legitimacy from a too reductionist point of view that makes legitimacy entirely a matter of “public relations” on the part of states.\(^5\) Instead, Beetham writes that power is legitimated if it conforms to established rules, the rules are justified by reference to a belief system that is shared by both the rulers and ruled, and there is evidence that the ruled consent to being subordinated to the rulers.\(^6\) Beetham also provides his own description of what happens when governments lose legitimacy, heavily informed by the collapse of the USSR’s satellite states in Eastern Europe. In Beetham’s view, once a state’s legitimacy begins to erode, it is less and less able to govern effectively as more and more resources have to be used to maintain order. The population feels no obligation to obey the government. Eventually, “the ruling party’s power over society becomes largely a negative one: able to control the population in the sense of preventing them doing what they wanted, but not in the sense of securing the cooperation necessary to the achievement of the government’s policies.”\(^7\)

In addition to working on the broad level of how governments are legitimated, Beetham also discussed why each of the three aspects of legitimacy is so difficult to maintain. In his view, without an independent, impartial judiciary and a subordinate military, eventually the government will break the rules and damage its legitimacy; the incentives for keeping or seizing power are too high. In order to have a common belief system that justifies those rules, the people must believe in an authoritative source of power and the government’s desire to pursue the

\(^5\) Beetham, 10  
\(^6\) Ibid., 16  
\(^7\) Ibid., 134
common interest. And finally, the citizens must participate in government, either through elections or mass mobilization. Beetham views mobilization as legitimating because it involves the population participating in activities “supportive of the regime and contributory to the realization of its political goals.”

However much these two figures might dominate the field, Weber and Beetham are not the only major voices discussing legitimacy. In Legitimation Crisis, Jurgen Habermas elaborates on and alters Weber’s vision of rational legal sovereignty. He argues that Weberian rational-legal sovereignty is fundamentally not rational at all; the laws do not have to prove that they have any rational use to the subjects of the state. Instead, Habermas believes that “legitimacy is an empirical phenomenon without an imminent relation to truth” and therefore “the grounds upon which it is explicitly based have only psychological significance.” For Habermas, Weberian rational-legal legitimacy is an artificial construct created by the state itself in order to justify its existence, and therefore does not break down when faced with empirical challenges to its claims but rather when “the institutionalized prejudices and observable behavioral dispositions” of the citizens change. In order to understand legitimacy, Habermas believed social scientists must construct “a developmental sequence of historical forms of legitimation after the pattern of cognitive developmental psychology.” Charles Taylor’s elaboration on Habermas, the article “Legitimation Crisis?” provides yet another perspective. Arguing from a Marxist point of view, Taylor writes that Weber’s three models are too strict and, like Beetham, too focused on the role of the state. Instead, societies each create their own standards of what government should do; it is when a government violates these standards in the eyes of the people that legitimacy is lost.

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8 Ibid., 155  
9 Habermas, 97  
10 Ibid., 97  
11 Beetham, 15
Legitimacy in Soviet-Style States

Stephen White, in his extremely influential article “Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy,” attempted to place Weberian legitimation within the context of Soviet-style economic states, Communist China included. Although other scholars had put forth elements of this theory before, White was the major English-language author who brought together the political, theoretical, and economic arguments in a single place. He argued that Communist governments would not submit themselves to the scrutiny and accountability required by rational-legal sovereignty, could not rely upon charismatic legitimation after the death of the first generation of revolutionary leaders, and generally rejected traditional legitimation. This directly challenged earlier scholars such as Bogdan Denitch, who had argued that Communist states could legitimize themselves outside the Weberian framework through participatory mass-mobilization campaigns.12 Therefore, Communist states based their legitimacy on what White describes as a social compact based in economic growth, the terms of which White describes thusly:

The regimes concerned provide few of the civil liberties that citizens of the liberal democracies take for granted: free speech, an independent press, a rule of law, and genuine rather than plebiscitary elections. On the other hand, communist regimes do generally provide a high level of social welfare: a comprehensive educational and health care system, security of employment and stable prices, modest but steadily rising living standards and upward career mobility—all of them sustained by high and steady rates of economic growth within a framework of public ownership and central planning.13

However, despite how instrumental his paper would become in formalizing and popularizing the materialist-compact form of legitimation in Soviet-style states—virtually all later writers respond to White, either to argue against him or support him—at the time White felt that too much

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12 Weatherley, 4
13 White, 1986
contemporary scholarship had framed the relationship between the economy and the Communist state as being too one-sided; the state was portrayed as dependant upon the economy. White instead felt that Communist governments were adaptable. In the face of economic trouble, he believed that they were attempting to shift their legitimation strategies. White wrote that “I intend to reassert the primacy of politics and to point to the ability of the regimes themselves to maneuver, to adjust, to co-opt, and in one way or another to preempt the seemingly inevitable.”

White believed that Communist states’ method for doing so was what he called “mechanisms of adaptation” “by which the governmental authorities in these countries can absorb and process demands, expand the consultative capacities of their systems, give a stake in the system to various sections of their populations, and perhaps preempt demands for more far-reaching and antisystemic change.” Examples White gave of this process were the increased number of elections, even though they were not necessarily fair or truly democratic, broadening membership in the Communist Party, increasing the power of intermediary bodies like trade unions, and allowing increased freedom of the press.

Both aspects of White’s argument--the material compact legitimacy and the state’s desire to move away towards other forms of legitimation--would take on a prominent role in discussions of the modern Chinese Communist Party. Western scholarly debate has, in general, taken White’s model as the basis and debated to what extent and to what effect has the CCP shifted away from economic legitimation (See Gilley, Weatherley, among others).

**China and Legitimation**

A number of scholars have attempted to apply White’s theory of “social compact” Communist legitimation to China. Some scholars feel that Weberian models do not and should

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
be applied to China at all. Others feel that the Weber-White theory of legitimation paints with too broad a brush, leading to major sources of legitimacy being overlooked, and argue that Beetham, Habermas, or some other theorist’s model more accurately describes China. Finally, some scholars think that White’s theory is in general applicable to China, with various minor alterations.

One leading camp of anti-Weberians are those who believe that Western models of legitimation are not applicable to China at all. The most prominent of these theorists is Guo Baogang, who laid his alternative theory in his 2003 book *China’s Quest for Political Legitimacy: The New Equity-Enhancing Politics*. Guo argues that Chinese governments have throughout history been legitimated in two principal ways: first, through the consent of the governed, and second, through “utilitarian” social benefits.

For Guo, consent of the governed does not mean Weberian-style rational-legal legitimation through democratic elections, nor the mass mobilization discussed by Beetham or Weatherley. Instead, it is manifested in the popular support given to virtuous regimes and the anger directed at bad ones. In imperial China, this manifest itself in the idea of the “Mandate of Heaven,” the idea that wicked rulers would lose their right to rule and, especially in more Mencian strands of Confucianism, Heaven’s will would manifest itself in the form of popular discontent.16 This model does not only apply to imperial China; Guo argues that the Communist Party has used this type of legitimation as well. Its victory in the Civil War was used by the CCP as evidence of its popular support and the CCP has always presented itself as intrinsically linked with the will of the masses.

Guo’s concept of utilitarian legitimation, which he ties into the classical Confucian term *li min*, “benefit the people,” is different from White’s idea of a social compact based on material

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16 Guo, 7
well being because Guo believes that the state must choose between economic growth and fairness; it cannot simply “have it all” and produce enough to make everyone happy with the government. In Guo’s view, a legitimate Chinese government must strike the right balance between economic growth in general and the fair allocation of that growth. He fundamentally views the history of Chinese governments as a cycle between these two goals: a policy shifts society too far towards one of these values, which leads a loss of legitimacy, unrest, and a correction.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, he views the Chinese Communist Party’s recent shift in policies not as a move away from economic legitimation towards another form like nationalism, but rather another shift in the pendulum away from the efficiency model, which in his view dominated the Deng Xiaoping era, back towards equity.\textsuperscript{18} Second, Guo writes that this Chinese concept of utility is not only limited to economic benefits, as it is for White. The legitimate state must also allow citizens to achieve non-material goals, like the respect, family life, and leadership.\textsuperscript{19}

While he does not think that democracy is necessary to legitimate the CCP, like several other scholars Guo does see a new generation of “humanistic” leaders taking slow but significant steps in developing democracy. Guo argues that a liberal democracy would be impossible at the current stage, but a Habermassian deliberative democracy would allow the people to have voice and push for a more just distribution of resources without destabilizing society.\textsuperscript{20} He views this an aspect of his theory that Chinese society as a whole is moving away from efficiency and towards equity; democracy is an effective way for people to shift the pendulum without violently overthrowing the government. It is not legitimating the government, as it does for Weber, but facilitating a necessary changes in CCP priorities which then in turn produce legitimacy.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 4
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 14
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 10
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 64
In my opinion, the major difference between Guo and White’s argument is not in how they view the CCP as legitimating itself; the disagreement lies in how the legitimation is viewed in an historical context. For White, Communist-style social compact legitimation is effectively an aberration, a break from the normal three major Weberian forms of legitimation. On the other hand, Guo argues that a clear continuity exists from legitimation during China when it was ruled by emperors and China as ruled by the CCP today. As Guo himself says, one of the reasons he felt the need to create a China-specific model of legitimation was that “Western observers consider the Communist regime in Beijing to be illegitimate and thus predict falsely its collapse repeatedly.”

Vivienne Shue is another of the influential scholars who object to the White characterization of Soviet, social-compact legitimation in China. She, like Guo, argues that the CCP is following the footsteps of China’s historical rulers in its legitimation methods. Shue believes that while economic growth can enhance a regime’s stability, it cannot in and of itself serve to legitimate a government. In the case of China specifically, she writes that the CCP can hardly take credit for the recent economic growth, because unlike the Soviet economies White discussed, the growth has been driven by private enterprises. Instead, Shue writes that the CCP not only at present, but historically has framed its legitimacy as coming from its ability to bring order:

Beijing authorities claim a kind of credit only for their excellent and enlightened general policies (zhengce 政策) today – policies that permit and encourage the economy to flourish. The maintenance of the conditions in which the economy does develop and the people do enjoy more prosperity – this, I believe, comes much closer to capturing the actual core of the contemporary Chinese

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21 Ibid., 1
22 Shue, 2004
state’s claims to rule legitimately. What, then, are held to be the general conditions the maintenance of which will most likely produce such happy effects? Those conditions are, in a word, the conditions of stability — the conditions of social peace and order.”

Shue also argues that the CCP is not in aberration within Chinese history by legitimating itself in this manner. To the contrary, Shue believes that almost every dynastic regime has based its legitimacy on “Benevolence, Truth, and Glory” and the resultant state of social stability that only they can provide. While emperors might have framed it with appeals to Heaven and Nature in a way that Communists have not, Shue argues that the fundamental principles are the same: for example, the Qing Dynasty portrayed its monopoly on Truth through its support for Confucian learning and Daoist cosmology, for which the Communist government substituted Marxist doctrine and rationalist scientific knowledge.

Shue’s other unique contribution to the study of Chinese legitimation is that because the CCP claims to be legitimated by appeals to the traditional values of Benevolence, Truth, and Glory, it is as a result most vulnerable to criticism with regard to those very claims. For Shue, the CCP is not endangered by criticisms that it has failed to maintain a high pace of economic growth, because that has never been its source of legitimacy. However, attacks on the CCP for being corrupt — in Shue’s opinion not adhering to the ideal of Benevolence — or for its inadequate nationalism — Glory — pose a significant danger to the current government because they challenge the very foundations of its claim to legitimacy. As a result, Shue places more emphasis on the revival of traditional Chinese religions than any other scholar. She views this phenomenon as a rejection of the CCP’s claim to hold a monopoly on fundamental Truth; “Contemporary popular religious sects, with their syncretic systems of thought and action, posit

23 Ibid.
an even higher, more all-encompassing, and more potent ethical and epistemological order than the one embraced by the state.\textsuperscript{24} By refusing to accept the CCP’s rational, materialist philosophical worldview, Shue believes that Chinese citizens are in effect challenging the CCP’s political authority as a whole.

I do not believe that Shue’s explanation of a China-specific legitimation method is entirely convincing. The three aspects that she argues have justified all regimes in history are so broad as to apply most anywhere; few regimes have not claimed to be benevolent or defenders of national glory. I additionally feel that there is little practical difference with regards to legitimacy between a government claiming to create economic growth, and one claiming to create the conditions conducive to economic growth.

Other scholars believe that, while China is not a unique case with its own unique methods of legitimation, the Weber-White model still does not adequately and comprehensively explain the Communist Party’s legitimation strategy throughout its history. A leading figure in this school is Robert Weatherly, who in his 2006 book \textit{Politics in China Since 1949: Legitimizing Authoritarian Rule}, argued that there were two additional ways the CCP has justified its rule: first is quasi-democratic mass mobilization, and second is ideological legitimation.

Weatherly, echoing Beetham’s argument for the democratizing nature of mass mobilization, believes that especially during the Mao era, the CCP justified its government through integrating the masses into government, both in the decision-making and in the plan-implementation stages of policy. In this manner, Mao believed

\begin{quote}
the political integration of the masses would engender strong sentiments of worth and belonging; a common perception among the masses that their views and input were of considerable value to the party and were indispensable to the future wealth and stability of the country. In turn, this self-worth would generate feelings of loyalty towards the CCP and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Shue, 2004.
establish (or perhaps reinforce) the belief that the CCP was the legitimate ruler of China.”

In practice, this mass-participation took the form of policies like the 1947-1951 Land Reform Campaign, where peasants were encouraged to form committees, speak out against their traditional social superiors, and redistribute land as they saw fit. Weatherly believes in this campaign “peasants were made to feel as though they were active participants in the land reform process rather than passive recipients of it” and therefore it greatly increased the legitimacy of the CCP.

Weatherly also departs from White in that he argues that ideology has had and still does play in a key role in legitimating the CCP. For Weatherly, this ideological legitimation can only be found in one-party states and centers around a utopian vision, which the state is trying to lead society towards. This idealistic goal “places a responsibility on the party to maintain an exemplary and upright approach to leadership and means that problems inevitably arise if the party is perceived as incompetent, divided or corrupt.” Weatherley believes that both the mass-participation and the ideological methods of legitimation were de-emphasized after the death of Mao Zedong; the former, because following the Cultural Revolution CCP elites were hesitant towards encouraging political mobilization, and the latter because the widespread chaos, elite-level infighting that took place in the later Mao years, and the power struggle following his death ruined the CCP’s image as an idealized organization capable of bringing China to a utopia.

However, during the Deng Xiaoping era, Weatherley agrees with the White model of economic legitimation. The delegitimization of the CCP mentioned above meant that, in White’s

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25 Weatherley, 4
26 Weatherley, 31
27 Ibid., 11
28 Ibid., 88
opinion, the Party’s only choice was to “reinvent [itself] along economic lines.”29 The economic reforms managed “to restore a degree of credibility to CCP rule that was absent at the start of the reform era.”30 But unlike other scholars, including White and Holbig and Gilley, Weatherley believes that the economic reforms immediately damaged CCP legitimacy; he is a firm believer in the importance of ideology, and as a result writes that the ideological contradictions brought about by a Communist government encouraging private enterprise led to widespread discontent. He attributes the dissatisfaction that led to the 1989 demonstrations in large part to “the absence of a clear and unified vision within the party leadership over economic reform.”31

Weatherley also argues for Deng-era attempts to create Weberian rational-legal sovereignty. These include increased systemization of internal CCP decision making, increasing intra-Party democracy, strengthening the state (as opposed to the Communist Party itself), and revising the general election law. For Weathley, these reforms was caused in part by “outside pressure” coming from the general population upset that political reform was lagging behind economic reform.32 However, I do not find this argument entirely convincing; Weatherly uses as evidence reforms that began as early as 1979 itself, the same year that the economic reforms began; he did not provide evidence to support his contention that as soon as the economic reforms began, there was already enough discontent to spur the central government into action. Instead, these government reforms seem more likely the result of a Party that had been recently devastated by factional in-fighting attempting to avert such conflict in the future by strengthening its institutions.

29 Ibid., 103
30 Ibid., 109
31 Ibid., 110
32 Ibid., 114
Weatherley believes that the Tiananmen protests were a turning point in CCP elite views on legitimacy: “The experience of the 1980s taught the CCP that it was politically dangerous to rely too heavily on economic performance as a basis for legitimacy.” As a result, Weatherly argues that the CCP has been actively searching for new primary sources of legitimacy ever since the 1990s, earlier than other authors such as Tang and Holbig and Gilley believe. He believes that the primary way the CCP has been trying to legitimate itself is through Weberian rational-legal legitimacy. He portrays this as a slow but steady increase in government transparency and adherence to rules and procedures through the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations, using as evidence the peaceful and uncontested transition of power from the former to the latter and Hu’s acknowledgment of problems like the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. He also believes that the CCP decision to implement some level of democratization at the village level is an attempt to build rational-legal legitimacy. He does not provide, in my opinion, convincing evidence either from primary sources within the CCP or academic debates that this reorganization is not in pursuit of other objectives, like reducing intra-Party strife, enabling local governments to pursue economic growth more effectively, or the desire to adhere to international norms. These objectives are not incompatible, but I would prefer a greater deal of evidence before believing that rational-legal legitimacy is the primary goal.

Gunter Schubert in his 2008 article “One-Party Rule and the Question of Legitimacy in Contemporary China: preliminary thoughts on setting up a new research agenda,” expanded on Weatherly’s claim that the CCP was attempting to build Weberian rational-legal sovereignty. He argued that far too many scholars were dismissing the CCP’s efforts at institutional reform out of hand; in his view, many were so focused on the “death of ideology” following the death of Mao

33 Ibid., 133
34 Ibid., 139
that they ignored any evidence that showed that the CCP was effectively shifting its legitimation methods because they were fixated upon predictions of the CCP’s imminent demise. Schubert argues that the CCP is building its rational-legal and democratic legitimacy: “Although neither democratic nor fully accountable to the people, no informed scholar would contest that the Communist regime has become more open and more accountable, even more democratic, during the last decade with the implementation of the various legal and political reforms mentioned above.” Schubert, 2008 He calls for more empirical research to determine the extent to which these reforms have successfully strengthened the CCP’s claim to legitimacy.

Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig fall into the camp of scholars who use White and Weber as a starting point, but alter those men’s theories for the specifics of China. They feel that while White-style economic performance has played a major role in legitimating the Chinese Communist Party during the reform era, its importance has been overstated by many scholars. First of all, they argue that economic success is not per se a source of regime legitimacy; instead, it has to be framed in ways conducive of positive subjective perceptions of the regime, for example, as competent, efficient, fair, committed to the realization of the common interest while avoiding publicly manifest partiality or bias, capable of selectively embracing the benefits of globalization while defending national interests on a complex international terrain, and so on.” Holbig and Gilley, 2010

Holbig and Gilley believe that scholars focus too much on the raw numbers of economic growth, and as a result ignore how the state chooses to frame that economic growth.

These authors also make the argument that 2004, not 1989, was the key point in the CCP’s policy on its own legitimacy. According to Holbig and Gilley, during a major party plenum that year, the CCP released a statement that acknowledged that the CCP’s status as ruling

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35 Schubert, 2008
36 Holbig and Gilley, 2010
party was not settled once and for all. This opened up the academic discourse to the study of legitimacy, with the result that with both the CCP and academia began passionately discussing the topic. The large number of primary sources, including numerous statements written by official Party meetings and academic debate among CCP elites, they use makes this argument more persuasive than Weatherley’s, in my opinion.

Holbig and Gilley challenge the position, staked out by Weatherley and others, that the Deng Xiaoping-era CCP eschewed ideological legitimization. Instead, they argue that the CCP’s ideological justification has been constantly evolving in order to suit the changing circumstances. While the CCP may no longer engage in the Mao-era utopian promises, they argue it still expends a great deal of resources to maintain ideological hegemony.

One of Holbig and Gilley’s most innovative contributions to the study of the CCP’s legitimation is the argument that there is another strand in the CCP’s legitimation methods outside of nationalism, economic growth, and rational-legalist legitimacy: what they refer to as “culturalism.” Culturalism is not the same as nationalism, whereby governments justify their rule because only they can protect the people against foreigners. It is also different than Weberian traditional-cultural legitimation, where governments justify their rule by appealing to the traditional way of doing things, whatever that may be. Instead, culturalism is “the claim to represent the legacy of cultural tradition(s) of society and, with it, its cultural identity.”37 This is not just, as Guo and Shue describe, the CCP adopting the same tactics as historical regimes; it is explicit, public appeals to Chinese cultural heritage. These authors argue that the increased prominence of Confucian language and imagery coming from the Chinese Communist Party represents a concerted attempt to harness China’s cultural legacy to legitimize the current government.

37 Ibid.
Finally, Holbig and Gilley believe that the Chinese Communist Party is attempting to attain something akin to Weberian rational-legal sovereignty. First, through semi-competitive elections for local government, as Weatherley also argued, and second, following earlier scholars such as Dali Yang and Andrew Nathan, through institutionalization: the creation of governing bodies that are perceived by the people to be trustworthy and effective can serve to legitimate the regime as a whole. Holbig and Gilley make the comparison to Latin America, where they say that studies have shown “that more efficient, professional, transparent, and consultative institutions can satisfy demands for voice and participation alongside effective governance for a considerable time, consistent with neo-modernization theory.”\(^{38}\) In their 2009 article “The Debate on Party Legitimacy in China: a mixed quantitative/qualitative analysis,” they use elite discourse to support their point. They claim that, based upon the amount of discussion, the policy makers within the CCP view their future legitimacy as being based in the creation of Weberian rational-legal sovereignty, a revitalized ideology, and mediating the growing inequalities in Chinese society.\(^{39}\)

Another way of discussing the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimation strategy that has recently been receiving more attention is that of framing; breaking away from Weber and towards Beetham, Maria Bondes and Sarah Heep believe it is not what is happening that is most important, but rather how the CCP is able to make people think about and discuss it. Heep and Bondes’ 2013 article which established their framework is called “Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Persuasion and Legitimacy: Official Framing in the Case of the Chinese Communist Party.” Here, they argue that the CCP’s legitimation has not been based on concrete achievements such as economic growth, but instead on concentrated efforts to convince the

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
citizens of the benevolence of the leaders of the CCP itself. They describe how “the official framing takes place within a permanent feedback loop in which the authorities react to perceived legitimacy deficits by disseminating frames targeted at assuaging popular discontent.” Based on data from the official reports given to the National People’s Congress, which by their very nature are designed as a way for the CCP to frame events over the past year, the authors argue that there are two general siloes through which every single event is framed: the manner in which the CCP is looking out for the common interest of all the people of China, and the CCP’s uniquely qualified leaders. Each of these is broken down into a further three sub-categories. The strength of this legitimation method, as seen by the authors, is its ability to be flexible while also offering continuity. When faced with new challenges or leaders with new agendas, the CCP can choose to emphasize certain aspects of its framing. They attribute relatively high amounts of trust to CCP rule to this powerful framing: “it is likely that the elites’ framing efforts and their provision of a continuous ideological framework have significantly contributed to the regime’s stability and high overall levels of political trust across the population.” However, I do not find their argument entirely persuasive. The ability to control the narrative is undeniably a powerful tool in any regime’s arsenal, but I do not feel that the authors adequately provide a strong causal link between the common themes in the reports to the PNC and faith in the regime. The themes they lay out are extremely broad; I would be surprised to find a regime that did not attempt to frame all its actions as looking out for the common interest or an example of the leaders’ virtues. Moreover, they focus on a time period (2001-2011) where support for the CCP was at some of its highest levels. If they provided evidence that during periods when support for the CCP was low, such as end of the Cultural Revolution, and showed that during those periods the CCP’s

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40 Bondes and Heep, 2013
41 Ibid.
messaging lost its coherence and frame, then their argument would be considerably more convincing.

**Conclusion**

The study of legitimacy in China has been approached in many different ways, from broad theoretical arguments to China-specific cultural studies. However, I believe that almost all the existing scholarship neglects one important aspect: the relationship between the CCP’s legitimation methods and the pre-existing desires and inclinations within the Chinese population. Some authors who work from a more Weberian framework, like Holbig and Gilley and Weatherley, discuss a shift towards nationalism, but in this view nationalism is described as, if not necessarily an imposition from above, something that is not particularly salient before the government attempted to utilize it. However, even scholars who draw heavily on Beetham and who criticized Weber’s state-centered approach seem to neglect the role of popular opinion; Bondes and Heep, and others that draw upon them like Jinghan Zeng, place all the initiative within the Chinese Communist Party to frame the issues, and then it is up to the people to accept or reject it. Meanwhile, the Chinese exceptionalists like Guo do not place the initiative to define the terms of legitimacy with the government. Instead, they seem to be immutable, shaped by the path China has been on for centuries.

I find this oversight especially perplexing because all the authors acknowledge the power Chinese citizens have to dispute the current legitimation model, whether, as Guo says, they are upset with the current balance between equity and efficiency or, as Weatherley claims, they are beginning to challenge the principle of economic legitimation directly. Yet no author seems to have attempted to ask a follow-up question: if the masses of the people have the power to reject a particular legitimation paradigm or tactic, do they also have the power to express the legitimation
standards that the believe the regime should meet? I believe that within the framework of legitimacy established by Beetham, Habermas, and Taylor, there is a clear dialogue between rulers and ruled about the nature of legitimacy. I do not believe, as Guo and Shue do, that the fundamental topics of this dialogue have been ingrained within Chinese society and the only argument is over the extent to which the CCP is upholding those topics; rather, it is a continuous back-and-forth.

As a result, I believe that to understand fully the shifting basis for the CCP’s legitimacy, we must look not just at macroeconomic figures and debates among Party elites, but at the desires the citizens themselves have expressed. The CCP did not merely select “nationalism” or “culturalism” out of *Autocratic Legitimacy Monthly*; there had to have been some reason that the CCP viewed these practices as especially legitimizing. A model that incorporates Beetham’s ideas on the ability of the masses to negotiate the terms of legitimation provides an explanation for the CCP’s choice. First, the people express, through unrest and complaints, some level of discontent with the legitimacy of the current government. The government then looks for a way to increase its legitimacy; it surveys its citizens and tries to gauge what issues are most salient among segments of the population are most unhappy, most powerful, and most numerous. It then tries to address some of these issues, choosing which issues and through what methods based upon the relative importance in the eyes of the people, the necessary changes in policy or rhetoric that would need to be made, and the danger posed by these issues if left unaddressed. Once the shift is made, ordinary citizens can either view their government as more legitimate, or continue voicing their discontent in hope of further changes. This process continues until only a small portion of the citizens believe their government to lack legitimacy--or, possibly, there is a revolution.
I will argue that the Chinese Communist Party’s shift in legitimation strategies, away from economics and towards nationalism and culturalism, is not merely a decision by Beijing leaders to bring those values to forefront of Chinese society, but instead a response to the demands of the Chinese people for the CCP to address its concern for those issues.
Chapter Two: Economic Legitimation

Introduction: The Cultural Revolution and the Rise of Economic Legitimation

In order to understand the current shift in the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimation strategy, it is important to understand how the CCP has been justifying its rule for the past several decades. There is a consensus among scholars, from the ‘China-as-unique” theorists like Guo Baogang to mainstream Weberians like Weatherley and Holbig and Gilley, that during the Mao Zedong era, ideological legitimation played a key role in justifying the rule of the CCP.42 The most common articulation of this view is that before Deng Xiaoping, the CCP propagated a coherent and persuasive Communist ideology. They used classroom lessons, public plays, participatory activities, and constant reinforcement in official proclamations to explain to the masses the purpose, the purpose of the state, the reason for their hardships, and the utopian goal towards which all were striving. The CCP was the apotheosis of all of Chinese history, destined to finally eliminate poverty and inequality once and for all. Its citizens were both great heroes for their labor and immensely fortunate to live in such an historic era.43

Of the scholars studying the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy, Robert Weatherly differs slightly in his interpretation of Maoist legitimation. Echoing Beetham’s writings about the legitimating power of mass mobilization, he believes it was the participatory nature of the Mao-era policies combined with their ideological underpinnings that legitimated the CCP. That is, the content and the cohesiveness of Maoism was not key; it was the fact that it encouraged citizens to participate in and feel as though they had an influence on their government that made the Chinese accept the CCP. He writes “A goal was set by the party and the masses participated in

42 Guo, 32.
43 Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 18.
achieving this goal. This in itself was a means of legitimation.44 I find his argument interesting. However, I will not take one position or the other as to whether it is more correct than the more common view in this paper, as Weatherly believes that this method of legitimation ended with the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao, just as most scholars believe ideological legitimation did. If both camps agree that Maoist legitimation, whether it was ideological or participatory-ideological, was ended as a conscious decision by CCP elites in reaction to the Cultural Revolution, I do not think it necessary to determine whether one group or the other was entirely correct.

With the exception of Holbig and Gilley, most scholars, such as Weatherley and Gries, argue that the Cultural Revolution led to the end of ideological legitimation as a major pillar of CCP policy. During the Cultural Revolution, millions of Chinese citizens rioted and even waged wars against alleged “bad elements” and rival factions. The economy crashed, millions were killed, and not even the most important CCP officials were safe: Deng Xiaoping, for instance, spent most of the Cultural Revolution working in a tractor factory, and his son was driven to commit suicide after suffering repeated public humiliation. The ideological climate played a key role in driving the violence, both as a catalyst and as a justification. As a catalyst, much of the youth in Maoist China felt required to be a revolutionary vanguard but incapable of doing so; one recalls how the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution finally allowed her generation to live up to their forefathers:

> From now on, we no longer need envy our parents for their heroic deeds in revolutionary wars and feel sorry because we were born too late. Like the forerunners we admired, now we are going to places where forces of darkness still reign and dangers lurk. We will enlighten and organize the masses, dig out hidden enemies, shed our blood, and sacrifice our lives for the final victory of the Cultural Revolution.45

44 Weatherley 46.
This self-justification is loaded with the language of Maoist ideology: the glorification of revolutionary violence, the importance of constant change and upheaval, the necessity of cleansing “hidden enemies.” This children, imbued with these sorts of teachings daily, were primed to commit drastic acts of violence. Chan, Rosen, and Unger also argue that Maoist ideology provided the framework for the student groups that were to drive much of the violence. For a generation required to perform public patriotic activities in order to have any hope of improving their social status, it was not a drastic process to go from forming autonomous organizations to inspect businesses, then destroying ‘feudal’ artifacts, then finally to attacking people.46 Ideology also divided pre-Cultural Revolutionary society into clearly-defined, immutable classes of winners and losers. Those from “black” classes--children of former Nationalist Party members, capitalists, or landlords--were locked out of the best schools, Communist youth organizations, and top universities, and subsequently the best jobs.47 They eagerly took part is the violence of the Revolution, either to avenge themselves on their social superiors or to redeem their heritage and prove their Communist bona fides once and for all. Maoist ideology also provided the justification for citizens to act out on their grievances. Every faction claimed to be defending the true spirit of Mao’s revolution, and they all cited Mao’s sayings about the power of chaos and the necessity of violence to justify their actions.

Once Mao died and Deng Xiaoping consolidated his control over the government in the late 1970s, many of the overt elements of ideology and mass participation that legitimated the CCP were removed from Chinese society. There were no more mass-mobilization campaigns, students were not encouraged or required to engage in activism, the education system as a whole reduced its focus on Maoism, rhetoric about heroic, violent struggle was toned down, the utopian

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47 Ibid.
goal towards which Mao’s China was striving was mentioned less and less, and class background no longer forbade one from joining the CCP or attending a good college.\textsuperscript{48} It is this transition that in the eyes of most scholars marks the beginning of performance-based legitimation; as Laliberte and Lanteigne assertively state in their introduction to a 2008 series of essays on the CCP’s legitimacy, “[no] one believes that reference to the heroic narrative of the revolution can sustain a viable claim to legitimacy. Everyone agrees that economic performance represents the foundation of the CCP’s continued ability to assert its authority.”\textsuperscript{49}

Deng Xiaoping did not decide to de-emphasize ideology only because of its negative consequences; his administration also had to deal with the damage that the Cultural Revolution had done to ideological legitimation’s effectiveness. The mechanisms for its delivery, the leaders that had been its figureheads, and the tenets of the ideology itself had all been tarred by the violence and chaos of the preceding ten years. Weatherley writes

\begin{quote}
The institutions of party and state were destroyed by Red Guards, especially at the local level where they collapsed in a matter of weeks. The previously-united party leadership splintered into rival factions which declared a bitter and public war on each other. Perhaps most importantly, the party’s Marxist ideology which had been so effective in unifying the country under a common cause was thoroughly discredited. Far from being a vanguard of the people, the only political body capable of representing the interests of the proletariat, the party had shown itself to be incapable of understanding what the people wanted.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Therefore, the Deng Xiaoping regime was doubly-incentivized to move away from ideology. It was a double-edged sword which had been dulled by misuse.

As mentioned earlier, Holbig and Gilley dispute this narrative put forth by most China scholars. They argue that the de-ideologization of society following the death of Mao has been exaggerated, writing that “The alleged ‘pragmatism’ of Deng Xiaoping has been less about an

\textsuperscript{48} Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 358.
\textsuperscript{50} Weatherley, 103.
abandonment of ideology than about its constant renovation.” For Holbig and Gilley, ideology did not recede after the death of Mao, it merely evolved. In their opinion, Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” campaign produced an ideological framework for legitimating the CCP just as strong as Maoism. However, I do not find their argument convincing. Their evidence is primarily based in the CCP’s continued support for official scholars who modify Marxism and Maoism to fit the circumstances. They do not show how or if these esoteric discussions actually affected the discourse of regular citizens. Even if regular citizens were aware of this ideological evolution, Holbig and Gilley do not show how this process could legitimize the CCP in the same way as the Maoist education system that required regular, mass activism, or the utopian narrative of an entire society progressing to a new historic age did. Holbig and Gilley demonstrate that the CCP remained concerned with ideology during the Deng years, but not that it ever played more than a tertiary role in regime legitimation. Instead, I agree with the current prevailing view that CCP leaders looked towards economics as a way to solidify their legitimacy. Stephen White, of the material social compact, writes

“The political appeal of market reform was a recipe, in the eyes of significant sections of the Party elite at least, for recouping the Party’s political credibility by demonstrating its capacity to raise living standards and achieve China’s national aspirations.”

No longer would the CCP be legitimated by Marxist orthodoxy; a materialist ideology was replaced with materialism.

**Economic Legitimation**

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP began to increasingly emphasize its right to rule due its ability to provide economic progress. Material benefits had always been a part of the government’s legitimacy: land reform had earned it the love of the masses, and the

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51 Holbig and Gilley, 2010.  
52 White, 36-37.
Great Leap Forward was a promise to the people that, as described in the film *To Live*, in the future Chinese citizens could eat meat every day. But this material progress was intimately tied with Communist ideology. The land reform was not simply providing plots of farmland to peasants, it was framed as righting an ancient injustice and progressing China towards a new era. In the same way, while the Great Leap Forward promised improved material well-being, it also was promoted as part of the global struggle between capitalism and communism and as the effort that would finally allow China to surpass its old imperialist enemies. In contrast, Deng starkly stated the primacy of economic progress over ideology in his famous “black cat, white cat” analogy: it doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice. The meaning is clear: ideology is a vehicle for material progress, to be judged by its effectiveness. Deng never completely repudiated ideological legitimacy; instead, he elevated the importance of material benefits, saying “[a] regime with proper original justification can still suffer a legitimacy crisis if the regime cannot effectively satisfy people’s need.” Consequently, during Deng’s rule the CCP never put forth a new ideological justification for the emphasis on economics; Yuchao Zhu writes that it was only after the transfer of power to Jiang Zeming and the inception of the “Three Represents” campaign that the CCP signalled its departure from Maoist, ideological legitimation:

“This rambling theory [the Three Represents] deliberately expanded the party’s representativeness of the traditional proletarian to an overall representation of “the most advanced productive force in China, the most advanced Chinese culture and Chinese people’s best interest” in order to reclaim the authority to govern. It even opened the Party up to membership for the traditional ‘capitalist class.’ In so doing, the CCP explicitly committed itself to be a representative but elite governing institution and abandoned the characteristics of a revolutionary party.”

54 Guo, 149.
By abandoning the claim to be a revolutionary party, Jiang was essentially formalizing what Deng started: the jettisoning of radical Maoist ideology as a tool of legitimation. And by saying that the CCP was a governing party, it is implicit that its legitimacy would hereafter be determined by the characteristics of that government, not its role in teleological history of the world.

The transition towards economic legitimation went hand-in-hand with--indeed would have been utterly fruitless without--Deng’s economic reforms. Increased openness to foreign investment, tolerance of private enterprise, and decreasing the role of central planning allowed China’s economy to experience rapid growth for the first time since the early 1950s. Most importantly for the CCP’s legitimacy, these benefits were felt by ordinary citizens, many of whom gained access to better jobs and more consumer goods. This was achieved through the creation of a regulatory bureaucratic apparatus designed to ensure that newly-privatized sections of the economic could still be channelled towards the CCP’s goals.

Of course, as Zhu points out, “while competent and efficient governance is certainly crucial, merely relying on performance remains insufficient. In fact, people in society must be convinced that governmental actions are appropriate and beneficial.” Deng’s economic reforms, therefore, went hand-in-hand with propaganda campaigns telling the Chinese people that the growth these programs engendered would improve their livelihoods. The CCP was depicted not as the revolutionary force it had been under Mao, but as the only steward capable of modernization, who would shephard China on the tumultuous path to modernity and prosperity. The analogy was made to early days of Communist rule, when the CCP oversaw the land reform.

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56 Weatherley, 106.
57 Tang 13
58 Zhu, 2011.
59 Ibid.
and early industrialization that, for many Chinese citizens, considerably improved their quality of
life.\textsuperscript{60}

The narrative I have presented is primarily elite-driven; Deng Xiaoping and his cohorts
regarded ideological legitimation as dangerous, therefore they shifted the CCP’s legitimation
strategy towards economic and material factors. This is, unfortunately, the only narrative found
among major scholarly works; while some writers, such as Weatherley and Zhu, do give the
Chinese people agency insofar as their dissatisfaction with the situation of China during the end
of the Cultural Revolution threatened the stability of Deng’s new regime, little attention has been
given to what the Chinese people wanted out of their government at the time; we can reasonably
assume that after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (commonly described in Chinese as the
‘10 years of madness’) there was a widespread desire for order and stability, but beyond that it is
difficult to know whether, for instance, they desired the CCP legitimate itself through the
loosened restrictions on private enterprise and rapid, export-driven economic growth that Deng
was to provide them.

\textbf{Effectiveness of Economic Legitimation}

Deng’s economic reforms succeeded in many respects in buttressing the CCP’s
legitimacy. With the exception of the Tiananmen Square protests, the CCP suffered no major
challenges to its right to rule and the Chinese people expressed their support for CCP policies.
And although Tiananmen threatened the CCP’s legitimacy, it represented the high-water mark
for liberal agitation in China; since 1989, desire for democratic reform and admiration for
American-style democracy has significantly decreased.\textsuperscript{61}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{60} Weatherley, 102.
\textsuperscript{61} Tang, 77.
\end{footnotesize}
How do we know that this is caused by material legitimation as opposed to stability or other factors? Fortunately, public opinion surveys allow us to learn what Chinese citizens themselves want out of their leadership. During the reform period, they strongly voiced their desire for a government that could manage economic growth. In 1999, Wengfang Tang conducted one of the most significant studies of public opinion in China ever, interviewing hundreds of citizens across six different major cities about their social and political values. Their answers were striking; when asked what distinguished a good government from a bad one, almost half of all surveyed (48%) said effectiveness in promoting economic growth. The next two most common responses were similarly practical: efficiency (35%) and lack of corruption (34%). In contrast, only seven percent said that protecting individual freedom was key to good government. A coherent ideology was viewed as even less important; only four percent of respondents that they believed it was a criterion for a good government. “Dengism,” as opposed to Marxism, Maoism, Western values, and Chinese culture, was the most common way of thinking described as very important, indicating support for Deng’s pragmatic, materialist programs. Chinese citizens also ranked their own country’s political system as the best in the world.

Problems with Economic Legitimation

Despite its overall efficacy, the CCP’s strategy of economic legitimation has had several problems. First, those left behind by economic liberalization, such as employees in massive state-owned enterprises who face downsizing, have not benefitted from Deng and his successors’ policies. Second, with the increased prosperity has come increased and highly visible inequality,

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62 Tang, 71.
63 Ibid. 75.
64 Ibid. 73.
which weakens the CCP’s claim to be working to increase prosperity for all. Third, corruption within the government has a similar effect; the CCP can hardly claim to be working to enrich the country when its officials are lining their own pockets. This has proven especially problematic. As Tang discovered, lack of corruption was a key qualification for good governance in the minds of many Chinese citizens. When major public figures, such as the Deputy Mayor of Beijing in 1995 or Politburo member Chen Xitong in 1998, are caught embezzling millions or tens of millions of dollars, it damages the legitimacy of the CCP as a whole.

These problems, troublesome as though may be do not threaten the process of economic legitimation broadly; they could conceivably be solved through policies that combat corruption or reduce economic inequality. Instead, it is changing macroeconomic conditions that have driven the CCP to reevaluate the effectiveness of Deng’s model. China’s official GDP growth rate for 2015 was 6.9 percent, the lowest in more than two decades. This is not merely a cyclical slowdown caused by the business cycle or a temporary bump like the one that occurred when Western investors pulled out after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989; many economists believe this represents the new normal for the Chinese economy. Since the beginning of the reform period, China has been benefitting from relatively easy economic growth: surplus labor in the countryside is moving to the city and provided the engine to produce low-value consumer goods. Now, that export-led model of growth is running out of steam. China has run into what economists call the middle-income trap, defined by Kharas and Kohli as the economic situation in which states cannot grow because they are “unable to compete with low-income, low-wage economies in manufactured exports and unable to compete with advanced economies in high-

65 Zhu, 2011.
66 Weatherley, 144.
skill innovations." Higher wages are driving companies that produce cheap, low-skilled goods towards countries with cheaper labor such as Vietnam and Myanmar, while Chinese companies and workers still lack the technology and expertise to compete with Japan or the United State in the production of high value-added goods. Importantly, Zeng and Fang argue that the CCP is aware of and to a degree believes these predictions. Therefore, even if China has not truly fallen into the middle-income trap, its policymakers are acting under the assumption that it has. Holbig and Gilley make the same point, writing that “the CCP is aware of both the fleeting and the subjective nature of growth-based legitimation.”

Many countries have faced the middle-income trap; the theory was invented to explain the stagnation of Latin American economies. But China faces a unique and perhaps even greater challenge to its economic growth in the short-term: a massive demographic bottleneck caused by the one-child policy. The proportion of China’s population in the workforce reached its peak in 2010. That means that from then on, every year more children and elderly will rely on their families or the government to provide for them. This not only bodes ill for China’s ability to compete with cheap labor in other countries, it also poses an obstacle to the CCP’s stated goal of rebalancing the Chinese economy away from exports and towards consumption. Banerjee, Meng, and Qian argue that China’s high savings rate is driven by demographic factors: people

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70 Zeng and Fang, “Between poverty and prosperity: China’s dependent development and the ‘middle-income trap’,” 2014.
71 Holbig and Gilley, 2010.
save because they know that they will have only a single child to support them once they retire.  

This high savings rate will hamper any attempts to increasing internal consumption in China, forcing China to continue to rely on export-led growth. With life expectancy increasing, it is not unlikely that a married couple will have to help provide for not only their parents, but their grandparents as well. Eggleston et al. argue that mass migration from the countryside has destroyed the *de facto* social safety of having relatives with farms to return to during economic downturns, weakening China’s ability to manage economic downturns. They also write that the macroeconomic effects of the gender imbalance have been neglected by many scholars, and predict that the negative consequences associated with too few women and too many young men—violent crime, theft, and human trafficking—will hurt economic growth as well. 

An illustrative example of the problems China faces in continuing its economic growth is the current state of the Shanghai Stock Exchange. In an effort to drive economic growth, in 2014 the CCP strongly encouraged its citizens to invest their savings in the SSE. Stock prices surged to record levels. Then, suddenly, the bubble burst, and prices began to plummet. Trillions of dollars disappeared in weeks. China’s investors demanded that their government do something to rescue their savings. Students at Tsinghua University led protests, chanting “Revive the A-ranked shares! Benefit the people!” Beijing responded, and has both sharply restricted trading and dipped deep into its foreign currency reserves to prop up prices. This is China’s current economic situation writ small: the CCP attempts to diversify China’s economy away from cheap

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77 Ibid.
manufacturing, but runs into institutional or technical problems and draws the anger of its citizens who had been promised prosperity.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping decided that the CCP’s rule should be legitimated not through ideology, but through its ability to provide economic benefits to its citizens. For decades, that decision has borne fruit. Despite the social upheaval caused by economic liberalization and the democratic desires that manifested in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Communist Party maintained a high level of support from Chinese citizens.\(^78\) But now the rapid economic growth that justified the CCP’s rule appears to be at an end. Global economic forces and China’s own demographic problems have made further double-digit GDP growth impossible. With economic legitimation running out of steam, the Chinese Communist Party’s elites have begun to look for other ways to justify their role as leaders of the nation.

\(^78\) Holbig and Gilley, 2010.
Chapter Three: Nationalism

Introduction

During the autumn of 2012, the Japanese government attempted to defuse tensions around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, claimed by both China and Japan. Fearing that the local government was planning to begin construction on the uninhabited islands, Tokyo decided to nationalize the territory.

An action that was meant to preempt tension--the national government wanted to prevent any provocative action by local actors--ended up inciting chaos. Across China, people believed this was a ploy by Japan to solidify control of what they felt to be sovereign Chinese land. Protests erupted almost overnight. The Japanese embassy was surrounded by a flag-burning mob, Japanese department stores were ransacked, Japanese cars were destroyed. Some citizens even took it upon themselves to embark for the islands on their own; scores of activists were arrested by Japanese security forces while attempting to plant Chinese flags on the disputed territory.

On one level, these protests were an organized display of nationalist zeal. The Chinese Communist Party provided transportation to the carefully-selected protest venues and ensured that police were on hand to prevent the chaos from getting out of hand.\(^79\) After several days of mass protests, the government pulled its support, shutting down bus and subway lines; the public rage ended. Jessica Weiss persuasively argued that the goal of these protests was to strengthen the CCP’s negotiating position against Japan; “In bargaining terms, giving a ‘green light’ to anti foreign protests sends a costly signal of resolve and generates a credible commitment to stand

firm.”

By showing that its citizens were full of nationalistic anger, the CCP could convincingly tell the Japanese government that it simply could not afford to make many concessions.

Yet this outpouring of fervor, even as carefully directed as it was, was not only targeted at China’s historical enemy. Lurking beneath the anti-Japan sentiment was anger at the Chinese Communist Party as well. At various protests, crowds shouted chants in support of Bo Xilai, the recently-purged boss of Chengdu known for his hardline nationalism and Maoist style. The chairman’s image was ubiquitous as well. While completely justifiable as simple reverence for the PRC’s founder and leader of the fight against Japan, the use of Mao in this protests also represents a subtle critique against the CCP’s current leaders. Brandishing the dead chairman’s face at this protests carries the message “Mao fought the Japanese imperialists to protect China; what are our leaders today doing?” And of course, the protesters outside the embassy were blocked by Chinese police officers; for those who already thought their government appeasers, the symbolism of Chinese government agents protecting Japanese property from Chinese citizens could not have been more obvious. This anti-government sentiment that manifested even when the CCP was trying to direct the protesters at Japan reveals another motive for the aid the CCP gave to the protestors: the fear that, without that aid, the protesters would have ended up protesting their own government, not foreigners.

The 2012 anti-Japan protests demonstrate the multifaceted nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism. The Chinese Communist Party at times uses it as a tool, nurturing and promoting it, but the CCP always takes the utmost care to ensure that it is unleashed only in a

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82 Shirk.
manner that can still be kept in control. As these protests show, that nationalist anger can just as easily be directed back at the CCP itself. While many took to the streets against Japan, an even greater number vented their feelings online and, free from government management, sharply attacked the CCP for its weakness. Wan Jun, a Party intellectual, in 2003 warned that nationalism was a double-edged sword that could easily turn destructive.\(^{83}\) The power and danger nationalism poses makes the CCP’s recent focus on nationalism as a legitimation tactic unsurprising, but there are a variety of views on the matter; some scholars, most prominently Christensen and Zhao, see this nationalism as a CCP-created tool to justify its continued rule, while others such as Gries and Holbig and Gilley see this nationalism as resulting from a mix of CCP policy and populist feeling.

In this chapter, I aim to answer two major questions concerning Chinese nationalism: first, has the CCP itself increased the prominence of nationalism in its legitimation strategy and, if that is the case, is this latest emphasis on nationalism therefore just another shift like the one that followed Tiananmen: a top-down re-evaluation of CCP strategy after which Party elites, having looked at the costs and benefits, have decided to increase nationalism within Chinese society?

**Increasing State Nationalism**

From the very beginning of the People’s Republic of China, nationalism has played a role in the legitimation of the CCP. The CCP’s official narrative, laid out in schools and museums, has been that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, China was weak and fell prey to imperialists. Then, the Chinese Communist Party drove out the Japanese invaders, won the civil war, and established a strong state that would no longer cower before foreigners. Mao Zedong’s

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speech during the inauguration of the People’s Republic of China was called “The Chinese People Have Stood Up” and emphasizes continuity with past Chinese struggles against imperialism, not a “clean slate” for a new Communist society. Chinese achievements, from holding off the Americans during the Korean War to the development of the atomic bomb, were framed not simply as successes of Communist ideology, but as evidence that Communist China had finally succeeded where the imperial and Nationalist governments had failed in defending the motherland. The CCP’s stance on Taiwan also makes sense in this nationalist context. Taiwan, before it was home to the Nationalist government, was a Japanese colonial possession; if Taiwan were not ruled by Beijing, that would mean that some legacy of imperialism remained and China had not yet left the shadow of the 19th century.

It was during the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests, that Western scholars began to take an interest in Chinese nationalism and CCP legitimacy. China experts like Suisheng Zhao began arguing that the CCP had begun increasing the role of nationalism in its rhetoric and education, as it was viewed as a way to combat Western, liberal influences. Zhao described this as a “pragmatic nationalism” in which “strong nationalist rhetoric is often followed by prudential policy actions. Beijing talks tough but acts in a highly calculated manner.” Nationalism was viewed as a useful tool to legitimize the regime, but not something that played a major role in how Beijing actually acted with regards to its neighbors. A typical example of this action was the CCP’s response to the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, which the U.S. insisted was accidental. State mouthpiece People’s Daily released a bombastic and nationalistic editorial:


“This is 1999, not 1899…. It is not the age when the Western Powers plundered the
Imperial Palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and
Macau…. China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese
fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and won victory over the United States
on the Korean battlefield. The Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China’s
sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated. The hot blood of people of ideas and
integrity who opposed imperialism for over 150 years flows in the veins of the Chinese
people. U.S.-led NATO had better remember this.”

This short statement demonstrates the CCP’s use of nationalistic rhetoric, alongside its oft-
repeated narrative of a China that once was weak, but now is strong. That transformation from
weak to strong is a key aspect of CCP propaganda. Yet despite this rhetoric, by the end of the
year a settlement had been reached and relations returned to normal. Chinese nationalism took a
back seat to a cordial relationship with the U.S.

But during the mid-to-late 2000s, the CCP’s nationalist posturing would lose its
pragmatic tinge. Even as the official doctrine was that of the “peaceful rise,” pro-Party
intellectuals like Qinghua professor Hu Angang in the 2000s began writing that China’s
economic growth would translate into a leading role for China on the world stage and eventually
dominance in global affairs. With the transition of power from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2012,
this rhetoric moved from CCP-allies and mouthpieces towards the government itself. China
historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom described himself as shocked by “the intensity of his [Xi’s]
nationalism.” Elizabeth Economy argues that Xi’s economic program has a strong nationalist
shade, and often publicizes its efforts to crack down on foreign-owned multinational
corporations while ignoring purely Chinese enterprises.

87 Holbig and Gilley, 2010.
88 Flannery, Russell. 2016. “President Xi Jinping’s First Year In Review: Nationalism ‘Worrisome,’ Web Less
first-year-in-review-nationalism-worrisome-web-less-open/.
89 Economy, Elizabeth C. 2014. “China’s Imperial President: Xi Jinping Tightens His Grip.” Foreign Affairs 93 (6):
I argue that this desire for nationalist legitimation is even driving Chinese foreign policy with regards to its maritime disputes with Japan. M.T. Fravel, in an intensive study of China foreign policy from the foundation of the People’s Republic to the early 2000s, argued that internal politics never led to China pressing its claims in disputed territory, challenging scholars who believed that states often asserted themselves to prove their strength to their own people. Instead, Fravel argued that China only escalated when faced with a “declining window of opportunity”—a limited time when its rivals would be especially vulnerable or China would be especially strong.90 A typical example would be China’s seizure of the Paracel Islands in 1974 from South Vietnam after the United States had withdrawn its support for the regime. Beijing had a limited amount of time before North Vietnam won the civil war and consolidated control, so that used force to seize disputed territory from the South Vietnamese before they were conquered.

But I believe China’s behavior with regards to both the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands violates Fravel’s model. In 2011 and 2012, the CCP took a number of assertive actions regarding the islands, following Tokyo’s nationalization of the islands discussed in the introduction to this section. If the CCP were truly motivated by stark opportunism, why would they only assert themselves when, for the first time in the history of postwar Japan, a pro-China government had not only been elected, but begun making conciliatory signals towards Beijing?91 This would have been the ideal opportunity to win diplomatic concessions from a new government seeking to improve Sino-Japanese relations. And then it was only several years later, after the conservative, anti-China Abe government returned to power, that the rate of incursions and other provocative

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actions by China would decrease. Fravel’s window of opportunity model cannot explain this choice of action; if anything, China had a declining window of opportunity for diplomatic action, not military action. Compare how Beijing dealt with its territorial disputes with Malaysia during that same period; Malaysia also elected a China-friendly government, and the CCP did not engage in assertive actions at all. Even when in 2009 Malaysia worked with Vietnam to bring in international arbitration to resolve the dispute over maritime borders, something Beijing has adamantly opposed, China still maintained cordial relations with Malaysia.\footnote{International Crisis Group. “Stirring up the South China Sea II: Regional Responses.” July 2014.} I do not think that China lacked the means or the domestic will to take a different tack with regards to Malaysia, but rather there was no domestic advantage to be gained from doing so. I believe that the CCP was not aiming to strengthen its claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in any substantial way, but instead took advantage of the Japan’s decision to nationalize the islands, which although intended to de escalate the situation could easily be spun as an aggressive actions, to pander to their population and show how the CCP was willing to stand up to China’s old imperialist foe Japan.

**The Rise of Popular Nationalism**

The CCP’s increasingly nationalist posture has drawn the attention of many Western observers. But what is often neglected is that the CCP’s turn towards nationalist legitimation was in many ways preceded by mass, popular demands for increased assertiveness that directly challenged the CCP’s narrative. The danger of these movements is manifested in two main ways: first, in the populist anger against the CCP for failing to defend China, and second, in the intellectuals who promote discourse that portrays the CCP as a weak government that is able but unwilling to stand up to Western governments.
Even during the 1999 anti-American protests, often depicted by Western journalists as manufactured by the CCP itself, one can see the danger that nationalism posed to the Chinese government. Faced with police cordons protecting American embassies and consulates, the Washington Post reported that students began chanting “Patriotism is not a crime.”\footnote{Pomfret, John. “A Protest Beijing Can Endorse.” The Washington Post. May 10, 1999.} This feeling would recur throughout anti-foreign protests; for many Chinese citizens, the CCP repeatedly failed to protect Chinese interests from foreign powers, whether in its perceived refusal to take a strong stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or its inability to extract concessions after a U.S. drone collided with a Chinese fighter jet in 2001.\footnote{Shirk} These accusations are especially powerful because they engage with the CCP using its own historical paradigm; the CCP, which has repeated for decades the claim that it and it alone allowed China to stand up to foreign imperialists, is being accused of folding before imperialists. Nationalists can easily adopt unimpeachable figures such as Mao Zedong to provide cover for their otherwise forbidden criticisms of the government, as they indeed did during the 2010 anti-Japan protests.

The spread of the internet into mainland China has facilitated this popular nationalism. As Beetham writes, regime legitimacy erodes when other actors are able to create institutions outside of the regime’s control; China’s websites provide the perfect place for discontented youth to vent their anger about their government’s latest failures. When the government clamps down on conversations in official, government-affiliated forums like those attached to newspapers, the nationalists simply migrate to another site and continue their discussions there. Whenever a new development involving sensitive nationalist topics occurs, the nationalists then return, flooding the comments sections with invective against China’s enemies and harsh criticisms of officials they view to be too conciliatory towards them. In this way, China’s internet
nationalists “challenge the state monopoly over domestic nationalist discursive production.”

They are a constant obstacle to CCP claims to legitimacy, flooding every news article with accusations that the government should have acted more forcefully in the face of foreign threats.

Susan Shirk argues that the internet is even more important than the traditional media in shaping media narratives around current events, because internet news sites, unburdened by censorship, can report on stories much sooner than print or television. She describes how, after an American spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet in 2001, the Associated Press story was posted online two hours before the major news networks broke the story and three days before People’s Daily, China’s largest newspaper, had a story on it. Because the online community was so intensely nationalistic and outraged, these early actors shaped how the rest of the media discussed the incident.

Shirk also argues that these vocal internet activists have an exaggerated effect on CCP perceptions of public opinion due to the nature of Chinese censorship, because it is through reading online that many officials gauge public opinion. Lagerkvist makes a similar argument, writing that internet communities can actually drive discourse, because they are the only media that is not under tight state control:

“When a significantly large critical mass of upset chat room posting makes something an issue for everybody to take seriously, it enters the traditional media as well. To a large extent this is opposite to how the agenda-setting function works in the West, where journalists in the traditional media repeatedly question and engage in missions to seek the truth. Thereafter, what has been disclosed is the object of lively discussions in web chat rooms.”

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96 Shirk, 82.

97 Ibid., 85.

In effect, the online commentary is the only view the CCP has into what its citizens think about government policy; because the Chinese internet is so vocally nationalistic, it creates the impression that this is representative of the Chinese people as a whole. Imagine the American equivalent, where politicians only saw their constituents through comment sections on news articles— it would drastically alter their perspective on what their voters want!

Providing the rhetorical ammunition for these grassroots nationalists are their academic counterparts. Beginning in the 1990s, a section of scholars and writers began making the case that China was now powerful enough to stand up for itself, but its government lacked the will to do so. The most emblematic of these works is the 1996 *China Can Say No*, a collection of essays that rocketed to the top of China’s bestseller list. While primarily an attack on the United States and its values, its authors also harshly criticized the Chinese Communist Party for allowing Western values to penetrate Chinese society and for not fighting back against America’s ‘containment’ strategy. Fascinatingly, several authors were protesters at Tiananmen in 1989 but, disillusioned with America, now believed that the government that so brutally suppressed their own movement for democracy was actually complicit in American cultural imperialism. In 2009, one of the authors, Song Qiang, produced a sequel, *Unhappy China*, which also quickly topped the bestseller list. This version was even more critical of the CCP; in their overview of influential Chinese nationalist works, Holbig and Gilley write that in *Unhappy China*,

> ‘First and foremost, however, the authors lash out against “political elites, government economists, cultural elites, editors-in-chief and even some military chiefs” at home who are accused of buying the mistaken belief of neo-liberals that “the West would care for and reward China if it humbly accept the world's criticisms” and employing an overly soft approach toward the United States and Western Europe’

This broadside at the CCP establishment, and others like it, is important because it was an immensely popular book. Works like *Unhappy China* tell Chinese people who might be inclined

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99 Holbig and Gilley, 2011.
towards nationalism that it is their own government that has been failing to live up to its promises. It justifies and encourages citizens to criticize prominent officials. And possibly worst of all, its claims are all couched in the very same rhetoric the CCP itself has been using for decades. The CCP can hardly suppress these nationalist writings for being unpatriotic or pro-Western, because nationalist writers diligently tie all their criticisms back to Mao and Communist, anti-imperialist ideology.

**The Causes of Nationalism**

Although this popular nationalism preceded the dramatic shift in CCP policy and rhetoric during the late 2000s, many scholars still argue that, while it might sometimes grow out of control and challenge the CCP, this nationalism is still a creation of Beijing. Weatherley and Zhao, have all argued that, following the Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government began to increase its promotion of nationalism among its citizens in order to strengthen its legitimacy. Gries describes their general theory as one in which “The Chinese Communist Party is depicted as a rational actor constructing and deploying nationalist sentiment for its own purposes, while the Chinese masses are portrayed as blinded by an irrational anti-foreign hatred.”

Although Weatherley writes that “it would be a mistake to assume that the party and its propaganda machine were solely responsible for the growth in Chinese nationalism following Tiananmen,” he still argues that the CCP initiated the switch to a more nationalistic mode of legitimation and “As hoped and anticipated, the public responded by rallying around the new anti-foreign party line.” Robert Fitzgerald put forth the most theoretically sophisticated case for state-centered nationalism, using post-colonialist theory to argue that the CCP did not attempt to foster nationalism in some crude attempt to garner legitimacy, but as an attempt to forge a

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100 Gries, 156.
102 Ibid., 156.
strong nation that could endure the rigors of modernization and foreign invasion. There is
certainly a significant portion of truth in these theories; as discussed earlier, the CCP has
undoubtedly used nationalism to justify its rule. This view has been dominant among elements of
the American press as well. For instance, many Western commentators, following the Belgrade
embassy bombing, insisted that the protests were entirely manufactured by the Communist
government. Many articles claimed that if only the CCP told its citizens the truth (i.e., the U.S.
government’s explanation that the bombing was an accident) there would have been no
protests or anti-American feelings.

Holders of this viewpoint seem to imagine the CCP as some sort of technician sitting in a
vast control room who, upon seeing the bar on the information panel labeled “economic
legitimacy” begin to trend downward, quickly turns up the “nationalistic legitimacy” dial. I feel
that this clinical, technocratic view obscures the importance of the Chinese citizens not just as a
set of binary variables who accept or reject the CCP’s chosen narrative, but as potential drivers
of that narrative.

I follow Holbig and Gilley in believing that “present-day nationalism is a complex
mixture of both state and popular nationalism, where mechanisms of top-down and bottom-up
mobilization are closely interrelated.” Mainland Chinese society has experience radical change
over the past few decades; millions of young people have moved to the cities and been forced to
compete for jobs while separated from their familial support networks. As Geremie Barmé in his

104 No definitive answer has been given as to whether the bombing truly was accidental. An investigation by the U.K. newspaper The Observer claimed that the embassy was intentionally targeted, but not to intimidate China as many Chinese felt; rather, this investigation claims that N.A.T.O. believed the building to be a paramilitary communications hub. N.A.T.O. and the U.S. dismissed this investigation.
106 Holbig and Gilley.
influential and controversial article “China’s Avant-garde Nationalists” writes, “The patriotic consensus, aptly manipulated by diverse Party organs, acts as a crucial element in the coherence of the otherwise increasingly fragmented Chinese world.” Communications technology has made it easy to keep with the news, and more importantly it has provided a venue for those of similar viewpoints to discuss that news. And as China’s economy has slowed down, the prospects for many have become more dim; it is no wonder that there is growing frustration and anger among the urban youth; the West is an easy object for that anger. The previous generation of youth venerated the West, but after Tiananmen the dominant feeling among the youth has been to reject Western values, something Barmé attributes not simply to increased CCP repression but to genuine disillusionment with liberal values as Chinese saw the struggles of the former Soviet Union.

One significant piece of evidence for the genuine nature of Chinese nationalism that I feel is often neglected is that Chinese populations in Taiwan and Hong Kong exhibited similar feelings to those of their mainland countrymen. Taiwanese and Hong Kong citizens would have grown up without the CCP nationalist narrative and had access to a greater variety of independent sources of information, yet still took part in, for example, the 1996 wave of anti-Japan protests. Holbig and Gilley describe how overseas Chinese “played an unprecedented role in 2008 as patriotic “interpreters” of the alleged anti-Chinese publicity found in these countries.” This directly challenges the claims of those who claim anti-Western outrage stems from CCP-twisted media; Chinese citizens abroad craft a nationalistic narrative even when working with Western media as a source. If Chinese nationals who grew up in very different

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107 Barmé, 207.
108 Barmé, 187
109 Gries, 122.
110 Holbig and Gilley
circumstances all exhibit this nationalist sentiment, it cannot simply be written off as the result of CCP propaganda.

**Popular Will and Nationalist Legitimacy**

The Chinese Communist Party is increasingly basing its legitimacy on its nationalist credentials. This change has been commented upon by virtually all observers of contemporary China. What has not been discussed enough, however, is the reasoning behind the decision to choose nationalist legitimacy to justify the CCP’s continued rule. It seems as though scholars have either taken for granted that nationalism can legitimize a government, or assume that nationalism in China is a carefully constructed force designed by the CCP to justify its status. As I have shown in this chapter, the relationship between nationalism, the people, and the CCP is more complex than that.

Popular nationalism arose a force in Chinese politics when the CCP’s economic legitimation strategy was still highly effective, during the late 1990s. Through both protests and in print, a portion the Chinese people expressed their belief that in order to maintain its legitimacy, the CCP must become more nationalistic, that it live up to its rhetoric about the end of the century of humiliation. Despite the claims of some in the West, this nationalism was not the artificial creation of the government; it contained far too strong of an anti-CCP coloring to be purely manufactured. In general, popular discontent focused around the two issues of engagement with Japan and failure to protect Chinese interests and territory in the face of perceived American aggression.

The CCP was not forced to respond immediately. Nationalism had always been present in its rhetorical toolbox, and while this grassroots anger directed at the CCP driven by nationalism was a new phenomenon, it did not yet threaten the regime. After all, as Tang showed, at that
point in time what the Chinese people wanted out of their government was competent economic management and stability. But as the years passed, economic growth slowed down while nationalist discontent persisted. CCP leaders decided that they should respond to these nationalist feelings. They did not, of course, simply accede to the demands of the nationalists. Instead, the government selected a few key areas in which the CCP could demonstrate its willingness to stand up for China without sacrificing core interests. Among other things, it took a hard line against Japan with regards to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, publicly prosecuted a handful of Western corporations, and strengthened its official rhetoric. It has not given into nationalists like Song Qiang’s demands to protect China’s beleaguered heavy industry or cut off diplomatic relations with nations that are perceived to disrespect China, such as France.

In this manner, the negotiation between people and state on the terms of legitimacy Beetham describes has been playing out. The masses expressed a desire for more nationalism and, implicitly, rejected purely economic legitimacy. The government then chose several areas of policy where it become more nationalistic. In this way, certain forms of nationalism, such as anti-Japanese protests, are normalized and turned into tools of regime legitimacy, while others, such as calls for economic protectionism, are sidelined. As of 2016, this process seems to be working, but only time will tell whether the Chinese people view this as sufficient, or demand further concessions.
Chapter Four: Culturalism

Introduction

During the mid 2000s, the Chinese Communist Party began introducing some new vocabulary to its official proclamations. It began to speak of building a “harmonious society” and the importance of “rule by virtue.”\(^\text{111}\) This might seem unremarkable; governments come out with new slogans not infrequently, and what state wouldn’t be in favor of harmony or describe its rule as virtuous? But in reality, this was a stark departure from the last sixty years of CCP policy, for these phrases were not new--they were old. They were Confucian. And they were exactly what Mao Zedong spent decades trying to stamp out of Chinese society. From the perspective of Maoist Communism, Confucius was everything wrong with Chinese society: he was feudal, hidebound, and his intellectual disciples had spent centuries fixating on the past when they should have been looking towards the future.

Even worse for diehard Maoists, this shift in rhetoric was only the tip of the traditional, Confucian iceberg. In 2004, the CCP decided to make Confucius the face of China’s international outreach and soft power through the foundation of the Confucius Institute program. The opening to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing proudly put the culture of Imperial China in the foreground, with Peking Opera and Confucian texts featuring prominently. Similarly, the 2009 state musical *Road to Revival*, successor to the epic and awe-inspiring paen to Communism and anthem of the Cultural Revolution *The East is Red*, talked of the “Mandate of Heaven” and

The old Confucian bogeyman of filial piety was invoked by government policymakers in a series of laws mandating care for aged parents. In this chapter, I will argue that all these efforts are aspects of a concerted policy by the Chinese Communist Party to legitimate itself through cultural means. While similar to the Weberian idea of “traditional legitimacy,” I believe this process is slightly different. The CCP is not claiming to be a traditional Chinese government; rather, it is framing itself as the legitimate successor to and protector of Chinese values. And similar to my argument regarding nationalism, I do not believe that this shift in legitimation is simply the result of CCP leaders fearing that economic legitimation is losing its effectiveness and deciding to call upon traditional Chinese culture as an alternative; it is a response to a widespread desire among the Chinese people, especially the burgeoning urban middle classes, for Confucianism and other elements from China’s past. This desire has grown concurrently with popular nationalism, although primarily among different segments of the population: nationalism is for the young and economically insecure, while yearning for Confucianism is concentrated among the relatively well-off. Despite the possibly conflicts that could arise between the culturalists’ desire to revive traditional culture and the nationalists’ nostalgia towards the militantly iconoclastic Mao, there is no evidence of this occurring; the nationalists focus on Mao’s anti-imperialist and militant aspects, while ignoring his hatred of all things Confucian. The culturalists, for their part, are generally too wealthy and established to take part in the street protests and internet rabble-rousing that characterize the nationalists.

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112 Cong
Unlike in the case of nationalism, very few of this class of people view their desire for traditional culture as a challenge to the current regime; however, the desire for cultural touchstones usually suppressed or ignored by the CCP has the potential to challenge the CCP’s discursive control. As evidence, I will discuss how a small but vocal group of intellectuals has been using Confucianism to challenge the legitimacy of the CCP.

The Chinese Communist Party and Confucius Under Mao

Despite Mao’s desires and CCP rhetoric, Confucianism and other elements of traditional Chinese culture still remained in the People’s Republic. The government not infrequently relied upon Confucian ethical beliefs or philosophical ideas. For example, Francesca Dal Lago argues that the Maoist calls to action in the form of the Little Red Book, big character posters, and editorials, relied upon a fundamentally Confucian framework in which the reader is expected to learn what is moral and immoral and then be driven to action by the understanding of “sanctioned texts.” Similarly, Sung Bin Ko writes that during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution high-level communist bureaucrats in the Beijing government and the Central Propaganda Department used the traditional Confucian methods of “literary and historical allusions” to criticize Mao’s policy.

But despite the endurance of these elements of traditional Chinese culture, CCP policy, especially the education system, was adamantly anti-Confucian. During the Mao era, slogans such as “The doctrine of Mencius and Confucius is the doctrine of the exploitation of women” and “Thoroughly criticize Confucius’ false theory of women’s subjugation” were ubiquitous on

school campuses.\textsuperscript{116} When former rising star Lin Biao suddenly became persona-non-grata, Mao organized the “Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius” campaign, tying together the philosopher and his former protege as two manifestations of China’s dark feudal past. The history curriculum was designed to denigrate Confucianism and attribute what were traditionally regarded as its achievements to other, now-defunct and therefore non-threatening schools of thought like Legalism.\textsuperscript{117} And during the Cultural Revolution, widespread violence against relics of traditional Chinese society was official policy: temples were destroyed, artifacts smashed, and every effort was made to purge China of “old thoughts.” Throughout Chinese society, the CCP led a campaign to dismantle and discredit Confucius.

**The CCP’s New Confucianism**

Widespread attacks on Confucianism ended after the death of Mao and the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping era; after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP’s leaders decided to reduce violent rhetoric and outright condemnations of the past. But Confucianism was still only tolerated; it was after the ascendancy of Hu Jintao in 2002 that Confucianism would appear as a major tool to legitimize the CCP.

Hu quickly heralded the return of Confucianism to prominence with the official slogan for this term of office, the “harmonious society” (和谐社会); harmony is a word with extremely strong Confucian connotations.\textsuperscript{118} Another widespread slogan was the “rule of virtue” (以德治国); “virtue” is the cardinal quality for which a proper Confucian should strive. An American

\textsuperscript{116} Del Lago.


equivalent might be a politician signalling his Christianity by promising a “righteous” government. The 2006 Plan for Cultural Development, part of the 2006-2010 Five Year Plan, was full of praise for Chinese culture, saying “It is the spiritual bond of our national heritage, of our unceasing dynamism, the source of our power of resistance in the face of difficult challenges and a complex world.”

This sort of rhetoric has a nationalistic tint, but is very different from the belligerent, militaristic posturing associated with China’s most vocal nationalists. The focus is clearly on the unique virtues of classical Chinese culture. Chinese culture was never described in such a positive way, or even discussed at all, in any previous 5-year plan. Confucius himself has been rehabilitated along with some of his ideas; in 2007, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao directly contradicted Mao’s views on the backwardness of traditional Chinese thought, stating that “From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen, the traditional culture of the Chinese nation has numerous precious elements, many positive aspects regarding the nature of the people and democracy.”

The comparison between Confucius and Sun Yat-sen is especially significant. Although Sun’s Guomindang would be the CCP’s enemies during the Chinese Civil War, Sun himself was always highly regarded in CCP historiography as a revolutionary and anti-imperialist who paved the way for Communism. By comparing the two men, Wen is claiming that Confucius was a precursor to the People’s Republic. In the late 2000s, the semi-mythical figures Yu and the Yellow Emperor, who feature prominently in Confucian texts as paragons to be emulated, were

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119 Billioud.

given official recognition as the objects of “national cults” by the Ministry of Culture.\textsuperscript{121} This gives official authorization for celebrations and festivals in their honor.

The CCP has been promoting the relationship between its government and traditional Chinese culture through more than just official proclamations and slogans. The 60th anniversary of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China featured a massive musical epic, \textit{Road to Revival}, carefully produced by the Ministry of Propaganda, the Central Committee, and the People’s Liberation Army, and attended by all of the CCP elite.\textsuperscript{122} This musical, like its predecessors \textit{The East is Red} and \textit{The Laud for the Chinese Revolution}, was not just an extravagant celebration. As Xiaoping Cong writes, “From East and Laud to Revival, all three epics were deliberately composed. The narratives, songs and themes of these epics, down to each word of the narration, were cautiously chosen to meet the official ideology of the time.”\textsuperscript{123} Cong argues that \textit{Road to Revival} frames the CCP as the legitimate successor to the Qing Dynasty and inheritor of the Mandate of Heaven, both of which run entirely contrary to CCP doctrine as it has been historically laid out. This doctrine claimed that the CCP is a revolutionary state that broke with the past. The traditional Confucian concept of “Mandate of Heaven,” whereby rulers rule through the approval of the divine, was also rejected by the strictly materialist CCP.

The CCP is not simply dusting off old Confucian quotes and aphorisms and sticking them in speeches; it is working hard to define what Confucianism means. The Party wants to ensure that the common conception of Confucianism is one that legitimates CCP policy. An excellent example of this discursive control is the CCP-backed blockbuster \textit{Kongzi (Confucius)}, a big-budget biopic released in 2010. This version of Confucius fights for the rights of servants and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} Billioud.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid..
\end{itemize}
women, and against the superstitious aristocracy. He is not a wandering sage who goes around criticizing governments, but a minister employed by a government deeply concerned with the well-being of his state’s citizens. The aspects so harshly attacked by Mao, like Confucian views on women, are completely excised. The film represents a clear attempt to define Confucius for the modern, CCP-run China. He is presented as a progressive, but not a revolutionary, as an enemy of corruption and defender of the common man, but still a loyal servant of the state.

Journalist Evan Osnos experienced a similar phenomenon firsthand when in 2014 the derelict Confucian temple next door to his apartment in Beijing was suddenly restored. The new man in charge was a veteran of Beijing’s Propaganda Department who quickly arranged a pageant and play to celebrate Confucius’ birthday. The play was an optimistic summary of Confucius’ life and works whose finale, appropriately titled “Harmony,” linked together Confucius’ teachings and the modern CCP. The pamphlet Osnos received described the “harmonious ideology and harmonious society of the ancient people, which will have a positive influence on the construction of modern harmonious society.”

The CCP had the long-abandoned temple into an efficient and alluring vector to disseminate their inoffensive, pro-regime version of Confucius.

The pattern seen both in Kongzi and the Confucian temple in Beijing is consistent with how Confucianism is portrayed throughout official media. Confucian doctrine concerning social stability, deference to virtuous rulers, and the importance of harmony is emphasized above all else, whereas elements of Confucianism that were salient in the early 20th century, such as Mencian democracy and the paramount importance of speaking truth to power, are removed.

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from the narrative.¹²⁵ This state-sponsored Confucianism is designed to be sterile and non-threatening, existing only to legitimize the current CCP government.

It would not be incorrect to attribute this sudden reconciliation between Confucianism and the CCP to CCP anxiety about legitimacy in a time of declining economic growth. As a result, the leaders of the CCP decided to buttress their regime’s legitimacy and chose appeals to traditional Chinese culture to do so. While I believe this description is accurate, it only provides half the picture; it removes the agency of the Chinese people who themselves expressed their desires for the return of traditional Chinese culture years before the economy even began to slow down.

Confucius for the Modern Middle Manager

China’s second most-bestselling author is Yu Dan, a professor of media studies who in 2006 published a series of lectures designed to make Confucius understandable to the common citizen.¹²⁶ Many academics viciously criticized the book as shallow work of pandering; one Hong Kong critic commented, “New-Agers in the West have made an industry out of freeze-drying non-Western religions until they're tasteless enough for the indiscriminate modern palate. Yu's book is the first time I've seen a non-Westerner up to the same sort of thing.”¹²⁷ Yet the book catapulted Yu into fame and fortune. Several years later, she wrote an equally successful sequel where she presented the works of Daoist precursor Zhuangzi in a similar manner. However the academics might feel about these books’ scholarly merit, the opinion of the Chinese people was clear: they wanted easily-digestible versions of traditional Chinese culture.

The revival of traditional culture began shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, when displays of Confucianism and folk religions were tolerated, though not encouraged, by

¹²⁵ Billioud 2007.
¹²⁶ Billioud 2007
local governments. Holbig and Gilley write that “particularly in coastal areas with lineage links to overseas Chinese communities and/or with high concentrations of the newly affluent who had benefited first from the economic reforms, temples and other sites of worship were rebuilt, new adepts were recruited, fairs were revived, and religious rituals were reinstitutionalized.”

This bottom-up revitalization of traditional Chinese culture set the pattern for the next several decades: local groups or individual funding small projects designed around experiencing some aspect of China’s past. As with regards to nationalism, some Western elites believed this to be a top-down effort, but Sebastian Billioud, who has done the most exhaustive research on China’s Confucian revival of any Western scholar, writes that “The schema here is not a matter of an all-pervasive party disseminating culture but instead one of an orientation by a regime that is increasingly allowing a greater of margin of autonomy to civil society while at the same time profiting from the evolution set in motion.”

In the 2000s, this desire for Confucianism led to the growth of Confucian schools. These range from preschools for very young children to academies designed for working professionals—Billoud and Thoraval describe one course designed for businessmen which had a tuition of around four-thousand U.S. dollars for forty days of classes. Beyond their claims to the mantle of Confucius, these institutions share one other thing in common: the vast majority were founded on the initiative of private individuals. Billioud and Thoraval diligently researched these institutions across China; they found that they were often founded by well-educated professionals who were drawn to Confucianism later in life, and then rallied support for Confucian education in their communities. Local CCP officials usually authorized these projects,

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128 Holbig and Gilley
129 Billioud 2007
and occasionally offered official support in the form of rent-free buildings, but the official status of these institutions is still “precarious.”

Interest in traditional Chinese culture is also manifest in popular media. Li Shi analyzed popular television dramas and found that storylines with traditional Confucian morality, such as self-sacrificing parents who give up everything for their children, were ubiquitous. This may seem unsurprising, but this kind of plot would have been extremely strange during the Mao years, where youth was exalted and age distrusted.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask: “why does the government care about the current fad among the nouveau-riche?” After all, unlike the nationalists, middle-class businesspeople funding shrines and sending their kids to Confucian-flavored daycare poses no direct challenge to CCP authority. In fact, it might even be a relief valve, offering a way for a newly-empowered class to feel important and influential without agitating for political reform.

But the CCP must view this interest in Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture as a threat to its legitimacy. The creation of this new Confucian culture represents a danger to the CCP’s discursive control. The salient example of how a non-political, personal philosophical movement could turn against the CCP is none other than the Falun Gong spiritual movement. Like Confucianism, Falun Gong rapidly grew during the relative liberalization of the 1990s, and like Confucianism, it even received a degree of official support. But instead of co-opting and controlling the Falun Gong, as happened with the Confucians, the CCP decided to crack down on the movement. While the reasoning behind this decision has been a matter of speculation among

Western scholars, a couple of explanations for their suppression have been put forth. First, because Falun Gong was not as intrinsically tied with conceptions of the Chinese nation as Confucianism was, it was both easier to exocitize and more difficult to tie to CCP narratives. A second possibility is that Falun Gong was more hierarchical, which meant that it could more easily be mobilized as a threat to the CCP. Whatever the reasoning behind the suppression, the act of criminalizing the Falun Gong turned them into a political organization. Julia Ching writes that “members [of Falun Gong] have developed an astonishing political consciousness.” Since the crackdown, their protests have garnered attention in the Western media and proved a persistent annoyance to the CCP—not an existential threat, but a continuing public relations problem both domestically and internationally. The modern revival of Confucianism is not entirely analogous to the Falun Gong; the comparison is merely to illustrate that a non-political ideology with numerous followers can, under the right circumstances, transform into an influential and tenacious political force.

Although the great majority of the bourgeois Confucius-lovers are non-political, there are many in China who want to use Confucianism as a tool against the CCP. First, beginning in the 80s, were the liberal Confucians, who argued that based upon Confucian principles the CCP must increase transparency, improve the rule of law, and begin to democratize. These scholars declined in prominence following the Tiananmen Square protests, but the CCP still decided to contest their interpretation of Confucianism by funding their own, Marxist Confucian intellectuals who used ancient texts to legitimate the current system. However, a second group of anti-CCP Confucians arose in the late 1990s, led by the formidable and argumentative Jiang Qing. Jiang and his “rujia” (Confucians) are anti-Western in outlook and so not as easily

133 Ibid.
134 Holbig and Gilley
dismissed; they argue that Confucianism must return to its rightful place as the morality of the Chinese state, with great powers given to Confucian scholars. Holbig and Gilley describe this as a direct challenge to the CCP: “the legitimacy of authoritarian rule by the CCP came under direct assault from another authoritarian utopia formulated by restorative Confucians.”  

For the time being, China’s middle-class Confucians have not taken up Jiang’s call to arms, nor it is even probable that they will do so. But just as Jiang followed the liberal Confucians, there will certainly be others who use Confucianism to criticize the CCP. That is why the CCP needed to adopt Confucianism and traditional Chinese cultural to legitimate itself; too many Chinese citizens desire those elements for rhetorical control of them to be ceded to would-be reformers.

**The Contrast Between Nationalism and Culturalism**

The CCP responded more quickly to the people’s desire for culturalism than nationalism. Both movements began gathering momentum in the mid to late 1990s, yet the CCP began increasing its cultural legitimation policies in the early 2000s, while only seriously increasing its nationalist legitimation policies in the late 2000s, as China’s economic growth faced a considerable slowdown. The differences in what these proponents of these two beliefs wanted and who those proponents were helps us better understand the two-way street of regime legitimation.

As discussed, there was no public outcry demanding that the CCP adopt Confucian slogans and rhetoric. There was only a public desire to have traditional Chinese culture in their lives, and a small number of academics demanding more radical changes. Why then did the CCP focus on improving its culturalist legitimacy before responding to the considerably more angry nationalists?

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135 Holbig and Gilley, 2011.
I believe the answer to be twofold. First, the nationalist and culturalist constituencies were very different. The culturalists were, in large part, the beneficiaries of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. They were middle class, well-educated, and lived in the cities. On the other hand, the most vocal nationalists were usually younger, poorer, and either still in school or unemployed. Therefore, on one level, the adoption of culturalist policies demonstrates the CCP’s desire to maintain support among its, for lack of a better word, core constituencies, rather than appeal to those already discontented. In light of the situation in the early 2000s, when economic growth was still extremely high--and along with it speculation in the West that the newly-empowered urban bourgeoisie would demand political rights. However, as economic legitimation began to lose steam, the CCP began to reach out to different groups for support.

The second explanation for this occurrence is that culturalism required fewer policy compromises to enact than nationalist legitimation. To increase its cultural legitimacy, the CCP primary has begun changing its rhetoric and allowing its citizens the freedom to promote cultural activities on their own initiative. While this could allow for challenges to the CCP’s discursive control in the future, and represents yet another link to the ideology of Mao severed, these are relative minor concessions compared to those demanded by the nationalists, such as a reverse of economic liberalization and a far more belligerent foreign policy.

The Chinese citizens have driven the changes in their government’s legitimation policy, but the difference in the CCP’s response to the demands to nationalism and culturalism demonstrates Beetham’s idea of the legitimation process as a continuing dialogue between the rulers and ruled. As the political and economic context changed, what the CCP was willing to consider acceptable policy compromises in the name of legitimacy changed.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

This debate on the exact mechanisms of the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimation strategy might seem immaterial; what does it matter if the CCP is becoming more nationalistic in response to the feelings of the Chinese people as opposed to as the result of a top-down decision? After all, the end result is the same, is it not? In the same way, how does understanding that culturalism is a response to the organic desires of the Chinese people affect our broader conception of the world?

This more nuanced understanding of the CCP’s legitimation process can be practically applied in the realm of diplomacy between the United States and China. The discourse around Sino-American relations has a strong realist coloring. For instance, John Mearsheimer’s The Tragedy of Great Power Politics urges Washington to actively combat China’s attempts to establish its own sphere of influence in East Asia. His reasoning is based entirely on realist international relations theory. Ignoring any role that domestic factors might play, Mearsheimer argues that China is driven by security concerns to aggressively establish dominance in the region and, after that, challenge the United States on its own turf in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, the only option for the United States to take action now, while China is relatively weak, and so prevent China from ever dominating the region.136 While no American politician has gone so far as Mearsheimer, the influence of realist thought can be seen in the reactions to China’s recent assertive actions in the South China Sea, such as the construction of artificial islands. President Obama’s response has to been to match threat with threat, ordering the U.S. Navy to continue to sail through what China considers to be its territorial waters—a rational decision, from a realist perspective: the U.S. is signalling to China that any attempt to increase its

power too quickly would be irrational and too costly. Aspiring Republican presidential candidates have called for even more action to demonstrate America’s commitment to the region; Senator Marco Rubio, for instance, promised to “take action” if China continued to expand its claims in the South China Sea.

This tit-for-tat behavior, while usually framed in realist logic, would make sense even when accounting for the fact that China could be driven by domestic pressures in its actions relating to the South China Sea. In a top-down model, where the CCP is choosing to enhance its nationalist credentials and is promoting Chinese nationalism among its citizens, an American show of force could demonstrate to Beijing that the benefit is not worth the cost. The CCP could reevaluate and shift its legitimation strategy more towards culturalism, for instance. However, if the CCP is responding to its people’s desire for a more nationalist government, then attempting to dissuade Beijing through a demonstration of American military might could only backfire. If my hypothesis is correct, and the CCP is trying to show the Chinese people that is nationalistic enough for them in order to maintain its own legitimacy, an American show of force would in fact make it impossible for Beijing to de-escalate the situation. Such an action would play right into the hands of the regime’s nationalistic critics, who already accuse the CCP of selling out to the Americans. The CCP cannot simply decided to rely less on nationalistic legitimation when faced with American resistance, because that is not what its citizens desire. As a result, the United States, if it wishes not only to resolve the disputes in the South China Sea but to engage with China in the long term, should not attempt to attempt to force China to back down with its military superiority.


138 Marco’s Plan for China. Note: Senator Rubio has since suspended his campaign, his website has been shut down, and his policy proposals are no longer viewable.
An understanding of regime legitimacy that allows for the input of the general population also influences how we might expect China to change and not change in the future. For example, if the China were to escape the middle income trap and its demographic problems, and have its economic growth return to the level of the 1990s, those with a top-down conception of regime legitimation might expect the CCP to rebalance back towards material legitimation and away from the double-edged sword of nationalism. But if my hypothesis is correct, even in the case of a major economic turnaround, the CCP would still remain reliant on nationalist and culturalist forms of legitimacy, because that’s what the Chinese people have increasingly desired since the 1990s--when the economy was booming. Similarly, a new government, whether resulting from another smooth transition of power like has occurred since Deng or a more dramatic change, will still face that same pressure from the Chinese people. If Xi Jinping were to step down tomorrow, I predict that the increased nationalism associated with his government would continue, not abate. We should only expect change in how the Chinese government legitimates itself when the views of the people themselves change. Of course, the government plays a role in the desires of the people--in many ways, the CCP has been trapped by the “century of humiliation followed by Communist restoration” narrative that it has been propagating for decades--but this is a slow and gradual process. There is no single magic bullet, whether it is a more assertive, or even a more conciliatory, United States, a new leader, a new government, democratic reforms, or economic revival, that can suddenly alter the fundamental dynamics of contemporary China.

Third, I believe that the Communist Party’s use of traditional Chinese culture to justify its rule is a fascinating example of a state legitimating itself in relatively subtle manner. That is, many scholars have studied the most overt and ‘muscular’ elements of the CCP’s legitimacy: the mass ideological campaigns, the unprecedented economic growth, and swaggering nationalism.
But culturalism developed differently: the CCP responded to a slowing growing trend among some of the most well-off in society by inserting code words into its rhetoric and symbols into its ceremonies and by attempting to shape the discourse around Confucianism not only through scholars but in popular culture as well. I wonder what other subtle methods of regime legitimation in other cases may have been overlooking in favor of their more obvious brethren.

The time difference in the adaption of culturalist and nationalist legitimation demonstrates autocratic regimes willingness to stand firm on what are perceived to be core interests while offering concessions elsewhere. Because the desires for nationalist and culturalist legitimacy emerged at the same time, we can see from their different trajectories how the CCP viewed them both as threats and opportunities. Initially, the benefits of culturalist legitimation outweighed the relatively minimal costs, while nationalist legitimation was perceived as too dangerous. But as economic legitimation began losing effectiveness, the calculus changed and the CCP began building up its nationalist credentials. This demonstrates how autocratic regimes are performing a balancing act between maintaining various types of legitimacy and pursuing their own policy objectives. Moreover, the elite-level discourse analyzed by Holbig and Gilley give us an unprecedented level of insight into the reasoning behind these decisions. We can read high-level CCP officials expressing their concern with the way nationalist legitimation could turn against them.

Finally, I hope that this paper will serve as one more reminder that focusing on the political elite as the primary actors can at times lead to an incomplete understanding of a nation’s policies. Especially in a one-party state like China, it is easy to assume that political leaders are the only key actors. Their opinions are easier to gain access to as a foreigner and are often expressed in ways accessible to those with a scholarly background: opinion pieces, academic
debates, government policy papers. In contrast, determining the opinions of non-elites, let alone their influence, is a daunting task. Therefore, it is not surprising that often people create top-down models of decision making, in which non-elites’ opinions might serve as a check or limitation but not as anything more. But as the struggles of the CCP to maintain its legitimacy show, reality is not that simple. Even the leaders of an authoritarian state must negotiate the terms of their legitimacy with their subjects.
Works Cited


Zeng and Fang, “Between poverty and prosperity: China’s dependent development and the ‘middle-income trap’,” 2014


