

CEBRI

BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ASIA PROGRAM

XXVI CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

REPORT XXVI, YEAR IV

SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

Online discussion panel via Zoom

THE CHINESE POLITICAL SYSTEM



BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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CEBRI prioritizes themes with the greatest potential to leverage the international insertion of Brazil into the global economy, proposing pragmatic solutions for the formulation of public policies. CEBRI's work was recognized by the University of Pennsylvania's top global think tank ranking, which considered the institution the 2nd best think tank in South and Central America in 2020.

The Asia Program is one of the twelve regional and thematic programs currently operating at CEBRI. The Program is coordinated by CEBRI's Trustee Anna Jaguaribe, CEBRI's International Advisory Board member Ambassador Marcos Caramuru, and by the Senior Fellow Phillip Yang. External experts can be invited to participate in ad hoc activities, projects, and seminars, according to the Program's agenda.

ASIA PROGRAM

The Program promotes a systematic monitoring of matters relevant to international relations and Brazilian development, particularly those related to China. Special attention has been given to monitoring the ongoing economic reforms and political transformations in China, considering their global effects and impacts in Latin America and Brazil. This continuous examination allows CEBRI to provide information and analysis to its members, partners and to the Brazilian government, contributing to the construction of Brazil's strategic position towards China, as well as helping increase knowledge about China within Brazilian society.

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Trustee at the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI), Director of the Institute for Brazil-China Studies (IBRACH), Sociologist with a PhD from the New York University and post-graduated at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. She lived and researched in China from 1998 to 2003. She worked at the United Nations in New York, was a consultant at UNCTAD in Geneva, and a Professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).



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ASIA PROGRAM

XXVI CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

REPORT XXVI, YEAR IV

SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

Online discussion panel via Zoom

THE CHINESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Report by: Kamila Aben Athar

SUPPORT:



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Guiding Questions

To help us analyze these complex and dynamic issues, at its 26th Meeting, the China Analysis Group proposes three themes and questions to our speakers and audience:

1. What are the key features of the Chinese political system? What are the main differences between ideal and reality in China's political structure?

2. What are the sources of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party? To what extent can China deal with the lack of transparency, in the long run, considering the suspension of term limits for Xi Jinping?

3. What are the future possibilities for the Chinese political system? Can democracies introduce merit criteria into their multi-party democratic electoral systems in the West, and vice-versa? To what extent can the relationship between China and the world interfere in the Chinese political reality?

XXVI Meeting Report

1. What are the key features of the Chinese political system?
 - What are the main differences between ideal and reality in China's political structure?
-

According to participants, from the Political Science perspective, there are two methodological challenges in identifying the key features of the Chinese political system. Firstly, outsiders and insiders struggle to grasp all elements of China's reality, which could hamper the attempt to analyze China objectively. Secondly, Chinese reality is contradictory and complex, which allows only to see partial truths. Despite these challenges, participants pinpointed four key aspects that characterize the contemporary Chinese political system.

The first is the authoritarian aspect, with a concentration of power in a small group of elites, not elected through open and competitive elections.

The second is the party-state, which has the Chinese Communist Party as the essential defining feature of the system. This means that the CCP does not only play a leading role in the executive and legislative branches but also controls the entire political system, the economy, media, and all the major social organizations.

The third is meritocracy, which continues to be part of the Chinese political traditions today. Most of the Chinese top officials are career bureaucrats, with extensive experience in public service. This allows Ministers and other officials of different public issues to conduct long-term policies using their vast knowledge on each matter.

The fourth is democratic features, which include grassroots democracy, intra-party democracy, civilian control of the military, and to some degree, collective leadership. Although there is speculation that Xi Jinping might partially abandon the latter, it is still an important part of the system.

In addition, participants mentioned that some Western countries, including the US government, see the current world divided into two blocs; one is a democratic coalition

led by the United States; the other is an autocratic coalition led by China. Participants affirmed that this dichotomy leads the US to become more assertive in promoting its democratic values with allies and supposedly contests China's quest for supremacy.

However, participants argued that there are two crucial inaccuracies with this panorama. First, an ideal should be compared with another ideal, and not with reality. Looking at the reality in the United States, rather than a democratic system, it resembles more of an oligarchy or plutocracy. Democracy is an ideal imperfectly manifested in the United States. In parallel, the ideal that is partly informed by the Chinese reality is not authoritarianism; it is the conception of political meritocracy. Participants stressed that this identity was formed by thousands of years of history and is the closest to represent the notion the Chinese aim to select public officials with superior ability and virtue. In China, the gap between ideal and reality resulted in corruption, in which public officials serve themselves or family members instead of the community. Thus, the Chinese ideal system is characterized as a highly imperfect political meritocracy.

Participants highlighted that to properly compare ideals between both countries, it should be pondered the democracy in the US and the political meritocracy in China, whereas when comparing realities, it must be considered the authoritarianism in China and the oligarchy or plutocracy in the US.

Second, unlike democracy in the US, China does not want to export its political model. The Chinese government fully recognizes that political meritocracy is tied to China's history, culture, and size. For instance, participants highlighted that only large countries have the necessity for public officials to have extensive experience at lower levels of government, as well as a proven record of making good political judgments and having a long-term vision. In the case of China, not taking the right decision could massively impact the entire world negatively, such as the case of climate change. Also, from the age of Confucius, the dominant political culture endorses that the government should be led by exemplary people. Much of the debate ever since tried to discover what those abilities and virtues are; what is the relation between them; how to select public officials with superior ability and virtue; and which mechanism should be used, examinations or recommendations. This extensive debate in Chinese history has been institutionalized through a complex bureaucracy for over 2,000 years.

Participants stressed that China is not against democracy; it's rather a central value to the Chinese self-identity. At lower levels of government, leaders are selected by democratic elections in most Chinese villages. Other democratic values and practices are being conducted, such as deliberative democracy, and sortition. For instance, the Chinese ideal is to have support for democracy in lower government, and as moving up the chain of political command, the system should become more meritocratic. Therefore, participants evaluated that political meritocracy is not inconsistent with democracy.

Lastly, participants argued that China strongly supports universal human rights in the sense of rights against torture, slavery, and genocide. In principle, human rights are valid all the time in China, similar to the US and other countries; however, Chinese leaders go further and claim that the population also has the right to have their basic material needs met, such as the right not to be poor. When it comes to select and promote public officials, China also recognizes diversity. Therefore, participants evaluated that China is perfectly willing to try and let other countries flourish on their democratic heritage. China has its own ideals and should be judged according to those principles. Other countries may want to study from China's best practices, but the idea that China would invade other countries to promote its values does not correspond to reality.



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2. What are the sources of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party? To what extent can China deal with the lack of transparency, in the long run, considering the suspension of term limits for Xi Jinping?

Participants argued that good governance and historical heritage were primarily the elements that allowed the Chinese political system to achieve legitimacy by promoting economic growth and social justice, as well as by claiming to defame the national owner and conquer national sovereignty, which unified the country after years of civil war and foreign intervention. Initially, good governance only focused on poverty because it was China's major issue in the past. Nevertheless, participants pinpointed new issues the Chinese government is determined to tackle, which could become potential sources of legitimacy.

First, the fight against environmental problems reached a serious degree in China, which allows the CCP to gain more legitimacy in the regional and international arenas. For this matter, public officials are now promoted according to their ability to promote environmental sustainability.

Second, the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic provides another source of legitimacy. According to participants, China is the only large country in the world that has dealt with disease control relatively well in comparison to other large countries, becoming a role model for public health. In contrast, the focus on zero tolerance for any cases was important for US legitimacy; however, it is difficult to evaluate how the United States will come out of the current crisis since economic impacts are likely to persist in the long term.

Third, the meritocratic process also offers legitimacy because the leaders are perceived as hard-working individuals, which gives importance to their agency. Despite criticisms, Chinese top leaders are known to have an extensive bureaucratic career, with vast experience in the public service. In this sense, the anti-corruption campaign conducted by Xi Jinping is important, because corruption poses a political legitimacy risk.

Participants also mentioned situations that can pose challenges to the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy. First, since 2012, there is a strong emphasis on high technology, especially artificial intelligence. Although its positive outcomes, participants argued that the emphasis on technology might take a negative turn and become a source of uncertainty because the Chinese government might be seen as not just an

authoritarian but a totalitarian system, where the details of everyday life are managed by technology, controlled by the communist party.

Second, the increasing inequality could jeopardize the perception of the Chinese Communist Party. Currently, there are more billionaires in China than in the United States, and this poses a social cohesion risk. For promoting a more socially balanced growth, the private sector tutoring the billionaire industry needs termination to avoid broadening inequality that is already reaching higher levels.

Considering the financial instability and economic downturn, such as the case of the Evergrande, participants affirmed that it does not necessarily affect the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party because it depends on who is held responsible, what is the people's perception and who is seen as the best able of dealing with the situation.

In addition, the recent regulation of big corporations divided public opinion. Some are worried about the recent government policy actions and the possibility of China returning to a cultural revolution or even more extreme leftist term. Others welcome this as a positive policy action. Participants argued that this recent movement is a bold action at both political and internal bureaucratic levels. At the political level, Chinese leaders now realize that high economic growth is just one part of the government effort, which should also pursue social justice and public goods, leading to more balanced and sustainable growth. In terms of the internal bureaucratic level, the current trend is to emphasize more regulations to fight problems in the market. For this matter, the implementation process inevitably generated anxiety, given its uncertainty, and Chinese leaders now try to reassure the market and explain this is not another cultural revolution, but rather a normal market regulation.

Since the 1990s, the Chinese leaders tried to deal with the challenge of transparency by building a new government agency for that purpose, the State Council Information Office. However, participants evaluated that there is still a big challenge of turning the system more accountable, which is the long-term trend. In terms of implementation and how to build a more transparent system, that is another challenge that contributes to the negative international perceptions, misunderstandings, and suspicions about the Chinese Communist Party. For instance, to guarantee the success of the current system, participants argued that the Chinese government should have more democratic inputs in the future, potentially decentralizing the decision-making process to avoid getting the full blame for adverse situations.

Lastly, participants highlighted that there is a governance competition between the Western liberal democracy and the Asian model of good governance. The former is run by a multi-party system, which consists of political freedom and a free market system, and that faces widening inequality and political polarization. The latter alternative is run

by responsive but not directly accountable authorities, and that faces the widening of a different type of inequality and corruption. Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2013, there is a greater desire to tackle vested interests that cause corruption, environmental problems, and the increasing gap between rich and poor. For this purpose, there is a need for a more stable long-term leadership. By abandoning the Chinese presidency, which originally had only two-term limits, participants discussed that Xi Jinping sent a clear signal that he aims to serve a third term or even beyond to finish his work and achieve his goals.

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3. What are the future possibilities for the Chinese political system? Can democracies introduce merit criteria into their multi-party democratic electoral systems in the West, and vice-versa? To what extent can the relationship between China and the world interfere in the Chinese political reality?

Concerning future trajectories, participants argued that it is unlikely the current Chinese political system will dramatically change into a Western-style or a US-style democracy; nevertheless, there are other possibilities. According to participants, the status quo could be an interesting model based on a standard Political Science perspective; however, some could consider this a return to a totalitarian system, like China during Mao Zedong's era. Another possibility is to move to the Singapore model, which is still a domestic system, with a more open and soft version. The Japanese model could also be an alternative, which is largely a liberal democracy but with elements of its cultural tradition.

In parallel, participants stressed that there are latent political uncertainties that could pose challenges to the Chinese political system. One of them is that Xi Jinping has consolidated its power, which creates a major concern for many Western liberal democracies. Also, the Chinese Communist Party has expanded its leading role in different sectors, which could jeopardize innovation or its software power. Similarly, although performance legitimacy has been approved so far, in the case of an economic-social crisis, there is no assurance the system will be able to handle legitimacy challenges.

Participants evaluated that meritocracy and democracy may be considered different ideal types but are ultimately complementary. On the one hand, it is possible to improve democratic systems with meritocracy. One way is creating a meritocratic institution, which selects elites from different sectors of society based on their merit. A positive aspect is that the debates would be relatively more informed, less partisan, and more policy-focused. A negative characteristic is that this kind of institution is becoming more marginalized in democratic systems due to their lack of legitimacy since they are not elected by the people. Another way of strengthening the merit in electoral systems is to have a merit criterion in the voting process. A different possibility is having strong political party systems that train their leaders for a long process, offering the chance to acquire more experience of political judgment on proven record when they assume power.

On the other hand, participants highlighted that there could be a reversed process, with

democracy potentially complementing meritocracy. Even in China, where tradition and meritocracy play an important role, democracy should still be a very important factor in the system. Some of the previous democratic practices might need to be reinforced in the future to select the most capable and the most virtuous leaders. Although the meritocracy system has this purpose, sometimes it is not an easy task to identify these individuals, a gap that could be filled to some degree with democracy, if practiced well. In some sense, intra-party democracy, which already took part in the previous system in China, and even competitions limits within the party could be a better reform. Also, in previous years, China has had a more regular, predictable, generational change that strengthens the legitimacy of the system. Although the Chinese political system overall might not select national leaders through a competitive election, participants affirmed that democratic elements should still be implemented if the system wants to maintain long-term legitimacy.

Participants argued that the Chinese foreign policy assertiveness can be conceptualized into three categories: aggressive assertiveness, defensive assertiveness, and constructive assertiveness. For instance, participants evaluated that China's foreign policy became more active and assertive recently; however, it happened as a result of the Trump administration's harsh turn against China. Thus, China is conducting a defensive assertiveness since it has become more powerful, and feels it has more capabilities to defend its claim. Domestic politics also play a part in the story by having the Chinese leaders emphasizing internally the struggles between the United States and China, promoting a nationalistic sentiment.

Lastly, participants mentioned that international pressure still matters in how China conducts its foreign economic policy; however, in terms of the evolution of the Chinese political system, given that China is already a powerful country, US pressure would not fundamentally change China's domestic political system. Participants pinpointed three political legacies that will continue to shape China's political system. The first is the ancient Chinese dynasties, empires, Confucianism, and other political philosophies. The second is the Chinese Communist Party and its revolutionary legacy and to some degree ideology. The third is the opening reform, which has happened for the past four decades and brings some new ideas into the Chinese system.

Therefore, participants stressed that external pressure is not only not going to change China's political system but is likely to worsen the chances of the Chinese government promoting more openness. If there is very harsh pressure, like what happened with the deal with Australia, that will make the Chinese leaders legitimately more paranoid and feel more encircled, forcing China to rely on strong measures to rule and contest external enemies conversely. A more friendly external environment will strengthen the forces in China that favor more cooperation, multilateralism, openness, and humane rule.

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Participants



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Senior Fellow at CEBRI and Founder of URBEM, an institution dedicated to structuring urban projects. Master in Public Administration Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School, he was a career diplomat in the Brazilian Foreign Service from 1992 to 2002. He served in Brazilian missions in Geneva, Beijing and Washington. He has acted/acted as a member of boards of the following institutions: MIT Corporation Visiting Committee of the Department of Urban Planning (2012-2016); Arq.Futuro, one of the main forums for debate on architecture and urbanism in Brazil; Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo (OSESP); Conselho da Cidade do Município de São Paulo (2013-2016); Rio de Janeiro City Council (2013-2016); and Harvard University Brazil Office Advisory Group.



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