

Pierre F. Landry

# Decentralized Authoritarianism in China



The Communist Party's  
Control of Local Elites  
in the Post-Mao Era

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China, like many authoritarian regimes, struggles with the tension between the need to foster economic development by empowering local officials and the regime's imperative to control them politically. Pierre F. Landry explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages local officials in order to meet these goals and perpetuate an unusually decentralized authoritarian regime.

Using unique data collected at the municipal, county, and village levels, Landry examines in detail how the promotion mechanisms for local cadres have allowed the CCP to reward officials for the development of their localities without weakening political control. His research shows that the CCP's personnel management system is a key factor in explaining China's enduring authoritarianism and proves convincingly that decentralization and authoritarianism can work hand in hand.

Pierre F. Landry is Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale University and a Research Fellow with the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. He is an alumnus of the Hopkins-Nanjing program and taught in the Yale-Peking University joint undergraduate program in 2007. His research interests focus on Chinese politics, comparative local government, and quantitative comparative political analysis. His recent articles have appeared in *Political Analysis* and *The China Quarterly*.



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in the Post-Mao Era*

PIERRE F. LANDRY

*Yale University*

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## Abbreviations

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| CCP          | Chinese Communist Party                               |
| CLC          | county-level city                                     |
| COD          | Central Organization Department                       |
| CYL          | Communist Youth League                                |
| DIC          | Discipline Inspection Commission                      |
| JES          | Jiangsu Elite Study                                   |
| LPC          | local people's congress                               |
| MCA          | Ministry of Civil Affairs                             |
| MO           | mass organization                                     |
| NPC          | National People's Congress                            |
| OD           | Organization Department                               |
| PBS          | (Communist) Party branch secretary                    |
| PLA          | People's Liberation Army                              |
| PPC          | provincial people's congress                          |
| PPPCC        | provincial people's political consultative conference |
| PRC          | People's Republic of China                            |
| RMB          | Renminbi  |
| SEZ          | special economic zone                                 |
| <i>Subei</i> | Chinese abbreviation for Northern Jiangsu             |
| <i>Sunan</i> | Chinese abbreviation for Southern Jiangsu             |
| TPC          | township people's congress                            |
| TVE          | township and village enterprise                       |
| VC           | village committee                                     |
| VCC          | village committee chairman                            |



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## Decentralized Authoritarianism in China



## Authoritarianism and Decentralization

In November 2002, Hu Jintao became the fourth general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the “reform era,” which began in earnest in December 1978. The carefully orchestrated leadership transition was widely regarded as the most predictable and peaceful transfer of power in the history of the People’s Republic. The contrast with the events of the late 1980s that rocked the communist world could not have been greater. When communism ended, first in Eastern Europe, then in the Soviet Union itself, the future of the Chinese regime seemed very much in doubt. The series of demonstrations during the spring of 1989 proved that the CCP was not immune to the kind of political instability that led to the destruction of communism elsewhere. Although by the summer of 1989 the Chinese leadership seemed to have “won,” scholars outside China ascribed the use of force against demonstrators to the desperation of a Party weakened by ten years of reforms; Deng’s pyrrhic victory signified a “transition postponed,” but certainly not a precluded one (Shue, 1992; Pei, 1994).

Fifteen years later, the transition has still not taken place. Instead, the post-Tiananmen leadership surprised the world by embracing a breathtaking series of politically difficult reforms: deeper integration with the world economy, culminating with World Trade Organization membership in 2001; the restructuring of the state sector, including massive layoffs; the privatization of much of the housing sector in urban areas; and the generalization of partially competitive elections

at the village level. Robust economic growth continued, despite the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Far from collapsing in the 1990s, the Chinese regime thrived.

The durability of China's political system is not unique among authoritarian regimes. Among China's communist neighbors, the Soviet Union lasted seventy-four years (1917–1991) and the People's Republic of Mongolia sixty-six (1924–1990), while the North Korean and Vietnamese parties have remained in power from the 1940s to this day. Beyond the socialist world, other authoritarian regimes have also proved highly durable, such as Franco's Spain (1936–1975), Suharto's Indonesia (1965–1998), or the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) until the political liberalization of the 1990s. What makes the Chinese case especially intriguing is not the duration of the CCP's rule per se, but the manner in which political authority is exercised: China is an authoritarian regime, but it is also decentralized, and these two characteristics do not go hand in hand intuitively or empirically (Burki, Dillinger, and Perry 1999; Dethier, 2000; Gibson, 2004).

Most economists recognize that economic decentralization contributed to China's impressive performance, but political scientists have been far more divided about the political significance of these reforms for the long run. If we turn to the major cross-national compilations of regime types produced by comparativists in recent years, it appears that very little structural political change has occurred since the height of Maoism.<sup>1</sup> Yet even though the PRC has not undergone a transition to "democracy," the current regime is qualitatively different from the system that the reformers inherited from Mao in the late 1970s. These regimes differ from one another not only because the economic resources available to the leadership are larger than at any time in China's economic history, but more importantly because the mechanisms of accumulating and redistributing *political* resources, the manner in which conflicts within the Party are handled, and more generally the "rules of the game" – have changed profoundly.

In this book, I seek to explain how the CCP has devised and implemented a political strategy that preserves the core elements of the authoritarian system while pursuing economic and administrative

<sup>1</sup> Przeworski et al. (2000) code China as an authoritarian bureaucracy since 1954, while Freedom House ratings relentlessly find that Chinese citizens are "not free."



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