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Legitimacy and Authority in Xi's China

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Abstract

This article explores the sources of legitimacy in Chinese civilisation. While religion played a relatively minor role in China as a source of legitimacy for regimes, history, culture, and performance were more significant. In the 21st century, reacting to the impact of Western imperialism, the KMT and CCP added nationalism to the mix. In the PRC, legitimacy shifted from being centred on charisma, nationalism, and ideology under Mao to performance legitimacy under Deng Xiaoping. Under Xi Jinping, there has been a revival of the personality cult of the leader and an attempt to build his charisma, similar to the Mao era. There has also been a return to the use of history to bolster Xi's and the Party's legitimacy. While the party-state's performance legitimacy may be high currently, it is not what it was earlier. The extreme sensitivity displayed by the CCP in dealing with signs of domestic dissent and unrest hardly reflects the behaviour of an internally secure state. While the CCP and Xi certainly have power at home, and considerable popular legitimacy, they act as though they doubt their authority at home. The article concludes by considering the implications for China's behaviour internationally.

Keywords

Legitimacy, Chinese Politics, Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping

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Introduction

One can wonder at the longevity and persistence of the idea of a centralised Chinese state throughout history. “The empire once united, must divide, and once divided, must unite” as the opening lines of the San Guo/Romance of the Three Kingdoms tell us.

Within that larger issue, is the question of how, even in contemporary times, Chinese leaders maintain the authority and the legitimacy of their rule even after presiding over disasters like the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the Cultural Revolution (GPCR). Is there something in the Chinese idea of legitimacy that leads to even the mild criticism of Mao in the 1981 Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the Party being watered down in the 2021 Sixth Plenum Resolution on Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Past Century? This paper puts forth some insights on why this is so, looking at legitimacy in Chinese history and today’s situation.

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Legitimacy in Chinese History

An internal order needs legitimacy to justify its existence and needs power to survive. In this respect, it is no different from an international order. The order must reflect the balance of power if it is to be stable and enforceable, and needs a shared sense of purpose or interest among those that sustain and accept the order. A preponderance of power alone is insufficient to create authority in human societies — that also requires the legitimacy conferred by consent or acquiescence, by ideological or religious sanction, or by performance and delivery. It is the combination of power with legitimacy- their overlap or coincidence- that confers authority, both within and among states.

In history, Max Weber identified three sources of legitimacy—individual charisma, competence or performance, and the church or religion. Sacred authority or religion played little or no role in legitimating the Chinese imperial state. The ‘heaven’ in the Mandate of Heaven was not so much a religious construct as the way things were or Nature in the broadest sense. This had significant consequences, for it also meant that there was no higher sanction or law to which the emperor was subject. There is no *dharma*, or God’s law to which the emperor is subject. Nor was there a priestly or other class, caste, or group to hold the state and the emperor accountable. We therefore see in China, unlike in India, West Asia, or later in Europe, rule by

law not rule of law. The real checks on imperial authority were practical, namely, the power of the scholar-gentry and bureaucracy that the Chinese imperial state created as it transitioned from the patrimonial Zhou state (based on and administered through family or clan and other personal loyalty) to one where all citizens were impersonally administered through an anonymous bureaucracy chosen by merit rather than lineage.[1] In Weberian terms, China thus constructed the first "modern" state.

Weber's other two sources of legitimacy- charisma and performance- did indeed operate in imperial China. The founders of most dynasties were charismatic military leaders, though they soon transitioned to ruling from the throne rather than on horseback.

The Mandate of Heaven, in both its practice and its theory, sounds to modern ears like another version of performance legitimacy. Its loss is measured in peasant uprisings and anarchy in the land, while its gain is measured in success in defeating other claimants to the throne. And yet there is more to it than just success and performance. Empress Wu Zhao is not accepted as legitimate; others who carved out an even bloodier and more brutal path to power such as the founders of the Ming and the Qing dynasties are.

In addition, the Chinese tradition**,** more than any other civilisation, also relied on another source of legitimacy- history. The power to write the history of the previous dynasty, used to legitimise the present dynasty's seizure of power and to perpetuate a claim to the Mandate of Heaven, could be one explanation of the longevity of the idea of the centralised Chinese state.

Once the CCP came to power we saw its legitimacy shifting from charisma, nationalism, and ideology under Mao, to performance legitimacy under Deng Xiaoping and to a more confusing situation now under Xi Jinping

In the 21st century, reacting to the impact of Western imperialism, the Kuomintang and CCP added nationalism to the mix. Once the CCP came to power we saw its legitimacy shifting from charisma, nationalism, and ideology under Mao, to performance legitimacy under Deng Xiaoping, and to a more confusing situation now under Xi Jinping. We see today a revival of the personality cult of the leader, attempting to build up his charisma, in some ways reminiscent of Mao's cult. Mao certainly had charisma,

[1] *Francis Fukuyama: The Origins of Political Order; From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution (Profile Books, 2011).*

which even survived the GLF and GPCR. One wonder whether or not Xi also does.

Under Xi Jinping, we have also seen a return to the use of history to bolster his and the Party's legitimacy and claim to rule**.** Mao rejected the imperial past, seeing it as the cause of China's decline and weakness in the face of the West. He worked actively to separate China from its imperial past. The Four Olds Movement (四舊, *sì jiù*) [2] was only the most evident mass mobilisation to this end. Xi, on the other hand, has glorified Confucius and the imperial past and has created an imagined past of a Tianxia with China preeminent in the world and at the forefront in every respect. Wang Gungwu points out:

> *"The process of re-connecting to Confucius as sage may be largely symbolic because it is not a vehicle to drive the future. What it does is to provide the PRC with a better defence of its legitimacy. If China's past was rooted in the ancient emperor-tianxia, it was never an empire of the current narrative. It had its own line of descent down to the 20th century before it gave way to a sovereign republic in a new world order. China's quest for modernity, however, has taken the country to a more powerful centralised bureaucratic state."*

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, it has become progressively harder for the party-state to deliver the sort of growth and improvement in people's lives that Deng and his chosen successors did. For the first time, the 14th Five Year Plan adopted in March 2021 did not include precise growth targets for the economy as a whole. Most Chinese are aware that they are much better off than their parents. But under Xi, for the first time since the GPCR, the Chinese no longer seem confident that their children will lead better lives than they did. Therefore, the focus has now shifted by Xi to more populist goals of Common Prosperity, to fighting inequality, to self-reliance in Dual Circulation, thus bringing back echoes of egalitarianism and ideological purity reminiscent of earlier more ideological days in the PRC.

It is possible that we are seeing the CCP seeking new sources of legitimacy for internal governance in China, a phenomenon we also witness in several other major countries like India, the US, Japan, and others. Internal politics in China reflect a reworking of the social and political contract on which the party-state has operated in the past. While the swing from one source of legitimacy to another is painful and uncomfortable, by and large societies manage

[2] *Against old ideas, customs, culture, and habits of mind, declared by Mao at the outset of the Cultural Revolution on 1 June 1966 in Chen Boda's People's Daily editorial, "Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons." The campaign's full title was 'Destroy the Four Olds and Cultivate the Four News'* (破四旧立四新, *Pò Sìjiù Lì Sìxīn).*

such adjustments peacefully. Only in rare cases do they require a revolution to make the transition to new forms of legitimacy. China itself has transitioned in the last seventy years from ideology to prosperity, and now to nationalism to legitimise the continuous monopoly on power of the Chinese Communist Party.

While the party-state's performance legitimacy may be high, there are troubling signs that its authority is not what it was earlier.

Today's Situation

So, how does one evaluate the legitimacy of the party-state and its leader in today's China?

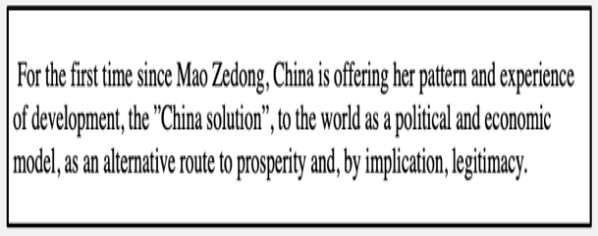
As mentioned before, the social and political contract in China seems to be under renegotiation. In the meantime, the CCP under Xi relies more on charisma, ideology, and an assertive nationalism for its legitimacy. The precise mix and form that these will take is still an open question. What emerges is called legitimacy with Chinese characteristics.

The performance legitimacy of the regime is high. The party-state has, after all, delivered an unprecedented level of prosperity to a larger number of Chinese, in a remarkably short period of time, and gets the credit for this. The high level of popular legitimacy seems to be borne out by whatever surveys and soundings were possible until recently.[3] As Dickson found, the Chinese people still see the CCP as the much better alternative to democratic Western or to post-Soviet Russian models. What they saw abroad and unremitting propaganda since the COVID pandemic began would only have confirmed them in this belief.

But while the party-state's performance legitimacy may be high, there are troubling signs that its authority is not what it was earlier. The regime stopped publishing figures of mass incidents (defined as protests involving more than 100 persons) when their number crossed 200,000 in China in 2012. Since 2014, China spends more on internal security than on national defence, and has built a surveillance state unmatched abroad or in history. The extreme measures being taken by the party-state in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia to enforce assimilation into Han culture of the minorities informs us of how seriously the CCP takes resistance in these areas. President Xi Jinping's signature ethnic minority policy line, "forging a consciousness of the common identity of the Chinese nation" (铸牢中华民族

[3] *Bruce J. Dickson: The Dictator's Dilemma; The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival (Oxford, 2016) pp. 301ff.*

共同体意识) is much stronger on assimilation than Deng or his successors.[4] Since Document No. 9 of 2013, the harsh crackdown on dissent and on differing opinions even extends to the diaspora and Chinese students abroad. Such extreme sensitivity and behaviour is hardly the sign of an internally secure or confident regime and leader.



There is no clear explanation for this dichotomy between performance legitimacy and the authority the party-state and its leader command in China. It appears that the CCP and Xi certainly have power, and therefore considerable popular legitimacy, but act as though they doubt their authority at home.

What might this mean for China's behaviour abroad? We see a similar pattern in China's dealings with the world. China's considerable power and a willingness on the part of most of the world to come to terms with China's rise, but of China's own behaviour revealing a deep sense of insecurity.

At their core, traditional Chinese concepts like the mandate of Heaven and the tributary system seem to legitimise the pursuit and deployment of pure hard power that China is increasingly displaying an ability to do. They thus also prevent China's absorption into or acceptance of Western concepts of legitimacy, all of which the Chinese rightly point out were designed and agreed without their participation. Some in the West, whose numbers are rapidly shrinking, still think that this is largely a question of integrating China into their existing "rule-based" order, that they have the gift of legitimacy in their grasp — a conceit that drove US policy from Nixon and Kissinger to Obama. China's leaders before Xi had been clever enough to let them think so while simultaneously steadily accumulating hard power, which they regard as the real and possibly the only currency of international politics. Now Western attitudes have changed and China is also no longer willing to be seen as a potential entrant into the Western order. For the first time since Mao Zedong, China is

[4] That being said, in 2017 Beijing denied there were any concentration facilities in Xinjiang. Then they said they were not concentration camps but vocational training. Then they said they shut them all down. That happened because the world began to watch. And, although they continue to this day, it showed that China cares about what the world thinks, and, when eyes are watching, it can have a constraining effect, or at the margin minimise the extent of the more horrific abuses, but not end all of them.

offering her pattern and experience of development, the "China solution" or **"**China model", to the world as a political and economic model, as an alternative route to prosperity, and by implication, legitimacy. Concepts of political order being advanced by China now differ from American and West European political traditions.

The practical implications of this are manifold. Returnees to the high table of international power like China and India so far did not have an alternate order or a vision to propose for international society in place of the existing order which no longer suffices. Now that China may have one, there are few states willing to buy into this alternative. It will be difficult to build a new order or architecture. Instead, we are more likely to return **to** the 'state of nature 'that we have known through history, in a world of contending powers of differing strength and weight in the international system, a world which is peaceful when the major powers see a common interest among themselves and not so when they do not. If we were to de-globalise or decouple economically, it could then be a world of multiverses, all in touch with each other for their prosperity but largely self-sufficient in the generation of their security. It would be a world of shifting alliances and arrangements, of unpredictability, and uncertainty.

Of course, order, legitimacy, and authority are man-made phenomena, social constructs. What can be made by man can also be unmade by man. This is not the first time in human history that we see foreign and security policies of great powers played for domestic political purposes or driven by insecurity at home and abroad. But the concatenation of events and concentration of economic and considerable military power across the world in the hands of those seeking change is significant. One might say that there are too many alpha males in the room**.** In history, discontinuities are not linear. The question is really whether the international system and states have the capacity to adjust their selfish, mercantile, territorial, and sovereign interests for their larger interest in the common good, particularly on the larger issues we face today — contested commons in cyber and outer space, climate change, pandemics, and so on. Neither the present context nor the nature of the political systems and leaders that hold power today suggests that adjustment will be easy. If leaders are insecure, buttressing their legitimacy and seeking to collect authority, the world will be a much less secure place**.**

Shivshankar Menon is an Indian diplomat, who served as National Security Adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He had previously served as the Foreign Secretary, the top diplomat in India. Prior to that, he was Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and Ambassador to China and Israel. He has authored a book named, Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy. His areas of interests include International politics, national security issues, India-China relations, Chinese politics and development, Indian Ocean, Cyber-security

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