



Of course, no one gets to the top of the Chinese Communist Party simply by being an engineer. These are all skilled and ruthless politicians, well versed in what it takes to outlast their rivals. None of them will be in any doubt that politics is a constant struggle. They have also had plenty of opportunity to learn from past failures. Present-day Chinese technocracy is a reaction against the catastrophic failures of the Mao years, above all the horrific famine of 1958–62, when ideological rigidity and dictatorial callousness cost

the lives of 40 million people. The reformist Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978 by defeating the loyalist faction known as the Whateverists – ‘Q: What should we do? A: Whatever Mao would have wanted’ – with the slogan ‘Practice is the sole criterion for judging truth’. In contemporary Chinese politics, pragmatism has supplanted the cult of personality. This is the new Whateverism – ‘Q: What should we do? A: Whatever works.’

However, the question that has yet to be answered is whether China’s technocrats have the political skills to cope with all the lesser failures that are bound to accompany China’s shift to a consumer economy and a world power. China is not a democracy. Its political elite fight with each other, but they don’t have to fight elections in order to legitimise their power. That means they don’t get regular lessons in losing the political argument. Weber thought democracy forced politicians to recognise the unavoidability of unintended consequences: in politics something will always come back to bite you. The danger for autocratic technocrats is that they treat politics as a machine they can control and regard every set-back as a technical problem they can correct. Instead of being forced to accept the messy unpredictability of political life, they use force to try to suppress it. The risk is that it can’t be suppressed for ever. When the mess escapes their control, they have no resources to deal with it.

For now, China’s technocrats remain in control. They have even managed to corral the internet as an instrument of managerial politics. The Chinese state employs tens of thousands of online