Red Flags and Legitimacy: Why Xi Jinping’s China is Different

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**Abstract**: This paper investigates the relationship between the political economy of China and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) state legitimacy. I argue that shifts in the political economy under Xi Jinping should be understood as mechanisms for regime stability and adapting societal legitimacy. Previous sources of legitimacy that the CCP enjoyed in previous decades are no longer feasible.

**Keywords:** Political economy; China; state legitimacy; history

The Chinese Communist Party’s 19th Congress in 2017, five years after Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power as China’s new leader, marked a critical moment in contemporary Chinese history, with implications for the country’s political economy and the Party’s legitimacy into the future. Xi took to the podium and addressed his fellow party members, outlining three distinct, yet monumental ideas that would reorient the ruling party and the economy. First was the enshrining of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” into the Party’s constitution, catapulting Xi Jinping to the level of only Mao Zedong.[[1]](#footnote-1) Second, Xi, like his predecessors, articulated the increasingly troublesome economy, rife with unbalance and inadequacies, not meeting the “people’s needs for a better quality of life”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally, Xi saw to emphasize a dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, incorporating the lost Maoist era with Confucian *minwei bangben* (the people alone are the basis of the state) ideals.[[3]](#footnote-3) Alone these points seem grandiose, and one might believe the 2017 19th Congress to be another procedural five year update. However, these three points triangulate to a transformative shift in Chinese political economy and the Party’s legitimacy. The emphasis on reorienting an unsustainable, credit-driven economy to a more equitable service-economy serving the people, along with a reemphasis on traditional Maoist and Confucian collective identities come as no coincidence.

This paper argues that this shift in Chinese political economy is directly related to “Xi Jinping Thought” as a means of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party. With a transformation of the economy and shifting demographics, like an ageing population and a rising middle class, previous sources of legitimacy the Party enjoyed from the onset of Deng Xiaoping in 1978 to the torch-passing in 2012 from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, are unfeasible. This paper outlines why the previous sources of legitimacy, namely economic growth, are now exhausted, and sheds light on the new iteration of legitimacy in an era of socialism with Chinese characteristics emboldened with “Xi Jinping Thought”.

In tackling the relationship between a changing political economy and government legitimacy, the paper is organized into three main sections. The first section addresses legitimacy. A theoretical framework for thinking about legitimacy in a Chinese context is developed, focusing on effectiveness and perception, along with a historical account of previous sources of Party legitimacy. Understanding Chinese history from the “century of humiliation” to Mao’s “New China” era is imperative for understanding Xi Jinping’s new sources of legitimacy, due to its historical, nationalist ties and a quest for Chinese rejuvenation. The next section turns to the ‘red flags’ in Chinese political economy. A great emphasis is made on the shift to a service-based economy and the implications it has for economic and productivity growth, human-capital, and material prosperity. Additionally, special attention is paid to the ageing population and the rising middle class. Key here is the question of getting old before getting rich, and the co-optation of economic beneficiaries in a state-capitalist system. Assessing literature on escaping the ‘middle income trap’ helps situate the Chinese middle class within an economy looking to compete in knowledge-intensive sectors. The third and final section turns to understanding democratic ideals in China and the role of effective governance on legitimacy. The ways in which Chinese society conceptualizes democracy give weight to Xi Jinping’s re-emphasis of Confucianist and Maoist values of effective governance and social harmony, along with authoritarian resilience of a single party political system. Assessing a society’s perception of legitimacy in authoritarian regime requires a substantive, guardianship approach to legitimacy and democracy. This distinction, scholars suggest, cannot be glossed over when analyzing the role of citizens’ democratic values on democratic transition or modernization theory.[[4]](#footnote-4) By identifying the history of legitimacy, the red flags in the economy, and perceived democracy, the paper argues that a new iteration of legitimacy is underway in contemporary China.

Legitimacy is a concept that has theoretical roots dating back to seminal work from Weber, Lipset, Linz, and Dahl. These scholars helped develop theoretical frameworks for looking at state-societal relationships, and how regimes garner consent from society to govern. However, the scholarly work on legitimacy primarily focuses on democracies, which raises implications when applied to authoritarian regimes. Despite its democratic roots, Seymour Lipset’s perennial work on legitimacy proves helpful for developing a framework for analyzing the CCP’s legitimacy, with an emphasis on effectiveness and perception.

Political legitimacy refers to the capacity of the political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper for society.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, perception is paramount in state-societal relations. A government is legitimate in so far as society perceives it to be. Key to this perception is effectiveness – the extent to which the system satisfies the basic functions of government as defined by the expectations of most members of society.[[6]](#footnote-6) The extent to which a system is legitimate, then, depends upon the effectiveness of governance and how society perceives the government to be satisfying society’s expectations. Along with effectiveness, the political system also derives legitimacy in large measure upon the ways in which key societal issues have been resolved.[[7]](#footnote-7) For instance, governments can gain or deepen legitimacy in effectively resolving economic strife, violence and unrest, or sovereignty. Upon seeing the political system’s effectiveness in harmonizing societal issues, society perceives the governing system as the most appropriate, and thus, legitimate.

This theoretical framework of legitimacy is helpful for assessing the manifestation of the CCP’s legitimacy throughout the country’s history. Systems source legitimacy in varying ways, often depending on the crucial societal issues the country encounters. Just as new perceived societal issues arise throughout time, so do sources of legitimacy. Tracing Chinese history in four primary acts, and identifying the paramount societal issues the Party leaders faced, permits a greater understanding of Party legitimacy over time. Since 1949, China has seen three primary iterations of Party legitimacy: the “New China era” under Mao Zedong, the “era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, and the current era of “socialism with Xi Jingping thought”. Each era, facing its own distinct societal issues, sought legitimacy through different sources.

When Mao Zedong proclaimed the People’s Republic of China in 1949, a new China “stood up” after brutal civil war and a “century of humiliation”.[[8]](#footnote-8) The 19th century saw incredible societal strife, with imperialism from Western and Japanese forces and numerous failed attempts at forging an autonomous state of China. For the “New China era”, the critical societal issue to overcome was political and social unrest, and creating social harmony under a national sovereignty. In this context, the “New China era” drew legitimacy from two primary sources. The first was creating societal order after centuries of chaos, solving the societal issue. The second source was through the revolutionary, ideological movement. Society’s ideological commitment to the Maoist revolution gave considerable legitimacy to the system and Mao Zedong, as the personalistic leader who was to transform Chinese society. Part of establishing Party legitimacy meant destroying the pre-revolutionary societal order -- removing existing civil society and social and religious organizations, like Confucianism – to procure holistic rights over all political, social, and economic discussion.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Communist party and peasant revolution served as the true means towards an eventual post-revolution society, cementing the Party as the soul of the country, above the state. However, into the 1970’s, effectiveness of governance began to burden Party legitimacy, with the minimal economic strides made under the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and a new societal issue was born. The command-economy model was producing little economic progress, with income per head trailing the many neighboring Asian countries. If one of the Party’s goals in the “New China era” was economic growth, effective governance was proving to be an issue for legitimacy in an economy plagued by inadequate food production, employment, and total factor productivity.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thus, with the new critical societal issue of economic growth, Deng Xiaoping’s transformative “Reform and Opening Up” plan brought limited economic liberalization, along with the establishment of special economic zones (SEZ) and town and village enterprises (TVE), with the goal of harmonizing the societal issue.[[11]](#footnote-11) Deng and the “Chinese Miracle” of staggering economic growth served as a critical juncture for both the Chinese economy and the Party’s legitimacy. With the previous iteration of legitimacy in the “New China era” sourcing from revolutionary ideology and societal order, this new iteration under Deng’s “era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” drew legitimacy from consistent economic growth and economic performance. With the government effectively delivering tangible, material benefits to society, Party legitimacy became more and more intertwined with economic performance and the state-capitalist system that brought about the “Chinese Miracle”, and less intertwined with Communist ideology.

Critical to this iteration of legitimacy through economic growth is the “Chinese market-liberal state capitalist system”, which, although market oriented, connects Party legitimacy to the performance of a state-capitalist system, with state control in large, strategic sectors of the economy.[[12]](#footnote-12) Naughton and Tsai state that “since the mid-2000s, China’s political economy has stabilized around a model where most sectors are marketized and increasingly integrated with the global economy; yet strategic industries remain firmly in the grasp of an elite empire of state-owned enterprises”.[[13]](#footnote-13) This state-capitalist system is now facing multiple ‘red flags’, and prospects for continued, strong economic growth are not as promising. These ‘red flags’, specifically, an unsustainable investment-driven growth model, an ageing population, and a rising middle class, characterize the new, critical societal issue that Xi Jinping has inherited. Therefore, before identifying the new iteration of legitimacy under the “era of socialism with Xi Jinping thought”, it is worth briefly delving into the current ‘red flags’ in China’s political economy. These ‘red flags’ help explain Xi’s quest for Chinese rejuvenation and a refocus on traditional Chinese ideology.

In a 2016 interview, Nobel economist Paul Krugman expressed worries for China:

*China scares me. China has a huge adjustment problem. They have an economy that is based upon unsustainable levels of investment and* needs *to radically shift from investment to consumption. They don’t seem to be managing it. They have a large internal debt problem and a government that doesn’t seem to be thinking clearly about it. At this point their response to economic difficulty seems to be to crack down on the financial press and to tell them to write happy stories.[[14]](#footnote-14)*

Krugman is correct in pointing out unsustainability and a need for economic shifts towards consumption-led growth, but incorrect in asserting the government is not “thinking clearly” or “managing it”. In fact, Xi and the Party’s reorientation of legitimacy away from economic growth and towards nationalism and reconquering the “New China era” is a direct sign that the CCP is cognizant of the forthcoming modest economic performance. The ‘red flags’ of an unsustainable investment-led growth model – characterized by over-investment, urban-rural inequality, and inefficiency -- and rampant zombie banks and firms, propped up by the state in the wake of global financial crisis in 2008, make up the primary economic obstacles moving forward.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Chinese government and China scholars have outlined the need for a new model of economic growth, centered around a consumption-focused economy with greater innovation and capital-intensive productivity growth, and a realization of a ‘new normal’ of slower economic growth.[[16]](#footnote-16) Critical to this shift is seeking a ‘high-road’ to development, focusing on knowledge-intensive industries with human-capital development and a highly-educated workforce.[[17]](#footnote-17) In addition to a transformative shift towards a slower, sustainable growth model, the Chinese economy faces looming banking, debt, and financial crises. In seeking a soft-landing, the state might have to implement systematic financial reforms and inflate or deflate the Renminbi, dramatically disrupting the status quo and creating economic and commercial instability.[[18]](#footnote-18) These two economic ‘red flags’ combine to spear through the long-standing “era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” source of legitimacy – economic growth and the societal order of status quo. However, these economic ‘red flags’ are not in a vacuum. Concurrently, China faces demographic problems – an ageing population and a rising middle class.

Low fertility derived from the reform period has manifested itself today, and since 2000, China’s population has been classified as ‘ageing’.[[19]](#footnote-19) As a ‘getting old before rich’ (GOBR) country, an ageing population could be a roadblock on the ‘high road’ development to a high-income status, service-oriented economy. If the loss of labor factor endowment advantages arrives before new advantages in capital-intensive and technology-intensive industries, slower rates of technological advancement and innovation could jeopardize Xi’s goal of China as a global leader in technology.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, as Johnston *et al* point out, there’s precedent for China’s ageing problem -- with success stories in Uruguay, Czech Republic, Russia, and Slovakia Republic – in transitioning from upper-middle income to high income status with an ageing population.[[21]](#footnote-21) The more intricate and interesting prospect for Party legitimacy is the rising Chinese middle class. Andrew Nathan describes the Chinese middle stratum:

*They chiefly rely on mental labor, support themselves from wages and salaries, can obtain professional employment with relatively high incomes and relatively good working environments and the corresponding level of family consumption and leisure life, and have some degree of discretion in their jobs, along with a sense of themselves as citizens with a sense of public virtue.[[22]](#footnote-22)*

They primarily operate the professional and technical staff of state and Party offices, white-collar administrative jobs, and ownership of small-scale private commercial enterprises.[[23]](#footnote-23) This middle class, importantly, developed under the state-capitalist system and sees material prosperity within the Party’s system. This Party co-optation of the middle class is paramount to the prospects of Party legitimacy. Orthodox modernization theory argues that with economic development and a growing majoritarian middle class, support and preference for democracy would take roots, incentivized by material interests of ownership and property, with rising expectations of government protection of property rights and the rule of law.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, in a striking contradiction, the new middle class in China and other Asian societies is seen as “illiberal” or “undemocratic”, and generally support authoritarian rule of the state, having a vested interests in the continuity of the regime as economic beneficiaries of state-capitalism.[[25]](#footnote-25) Further, however, this support for the CCP regime and the political system is more complex, with deep cultural roots and a distinct view of governance. This view of governance has implications for thinking of a rising middle class, along with legitimacy under “Xi Jinping Thought”.

One puzzling aspect of contemporary China is that the majority of Chinese society claims a strong support for democracy, and at the same time, a high level of satisfaction with the authoritarian government.[[26]](#footnote-26) Behind this puzzle is how the Chinese public understands democracy and guardianship values. Guardianship democracy and Confucian *minben* traditions help explain why the CCP has been so resilient to democratic transition challenges to legitimacy, and why “Xi Jinping Thought” re-emphasizes these Confucian ideas.

The late leader of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, was an outspoken critic of liberal democracy, and even claimed that the ‘western concept’ of democracy did not work in Asia.[[27]](#footnote-27) Lee Kuan Yew was speaking to the fundamental difference between a liberal understanding of democracy and a guardianship understanding of democracy, the latter, Dahl argues, “a perennial alternative to democracy”.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the West, democracy is typically understood by a procedural definition, stressing institutions that guarantee some basic freedoms and ensure rights to participate, hold leaders accountable through free and fair elections, and collectively make decisions for their society.[[29]](#footnote-29) Conversely, guardianship democracy, the widely held understanding of democracy in China, runs through a substantive definition, putting less emphasis on institutional procedures and more on morally competent leaders and effective service of public interests.[[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore, in a guardianship understanding of democracy, government is led by “competent and virtuous politicians with substantial discretionary power who are willing to listen to people’s opinions, sincere in taking care of people’s interests, and capable of identifying the best policies for their society”.[[31]](#footnote-31) Running congruent with this guardianship lens of democracy is the Confucian tradition of *minben* and Leninist emphasis on a government that treats the welfare of the common people as the foundation of its wealth and power.[[32]](#footnote-32) The outcome is a conception of government that is decidedly paternalistic and meritocratic, that values elite governance on behalf of the welfare of the people, and a traditional, cultural emphasis on social harmony, ethical behavior and respect for hierarchy. Most importantly, under a *minben* doctrine of democracy, the government’s legitimacy is essentially defined by the substance and outcomes of its policies.[[33]](#footnote-33) This proposition of legitimacy through effectiveness is critical for assessing how a Chinese society, and importantly, a rising Chinese middle class, perceives the current political system. Having identified the critical societal issue – ‘red flags’ in political economy and growth – and the traditional Chinese values of *minben*  Confucianism, the new iteration of Party legitimacy in the “era of socialism with Xi Jinping thought” can be framed in the developed theoretical framework for legitimacy. Facing incoming economic woes, the past iteration of legitimacy through prosperity in the “socialism with Chinese characteristics era” is at its ends, and must be buttressed with other sources of legitimacy. Under Xi Jinping, these sources lie in reclaiming the legacy of the “New China era”.

The new era of CCP legitimacy under “Xi Jinping Thought” seeks to reorient away from legitimization by economic growth and prosperity, and towards legitimization by “New China era” heritage and Confucian ideology, along with public welfare. This new era of legitimacy is voiced in Xi Jinping’s quest of Chinese rejuvenation – in successfully “harmonizing the institutions of 21st century China with the Communist Party’s Maoist ideological heritage”.[[34]](#footnote-34) The reorientation of legitimacy and reemphasis of an ideological heritage works to buttress worrisome economic growth in two primary ways.

First, stressing a collective identity of traditional Chinese heritage, and this time, unlike in the Mao era, an explicit connection to Confucian tradition, reinforces values of social and political harmony, ethical behavior, hierarchy, and a collective identity of nationalist sentiments. This re-invigorated patriotism for traditional ideology provides the Party a counterbalance to materialism and Western culture as the economy shifts towards a consumer based service-economy model of growth, which values innovation in knowledge-intensive sectors and high levels of education. In this sense, the new iteration of legitimacy acts as a counter-weight to keep the CCP and Chinese collectiveness as the soul of the country, as it faces disruptions in the status quo of the political economy. Secondly, in re-emphasizing Leninist and Confucian *minben* doctrine, material prosperity can still be utilized as a source of legitimacy, but rather than in economic growth, in effectively improving quality-of-life standards. Tapping into a guardianship democracy discourse, a society who supports democratic concepts will perceive legitimacy in the CCP if the government effectively delivers tangible benefits to society, in the form of public welfare and improvements in standards of living. As Tianjian Shi states, “the way Chinese people understand democracy leaves their government great space to maneuver.” “This space,” he argues, “constitutes the micro-foundation of authoritarian resilience in China.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The Party has space to maneuver around a ‘new normal’ of slow economic growth, as legitimacy through prosperity may not be in jeopardy if the slow growth is replaced by effective governance of public welfare. When Xi Jinping articulates an economy that meets the “people’s needs for a better quality of life”, good governance that provides public welfare can act as a source of legitimacy in the new “era of socialism with Xi Jinping thought”. Thus, by emphasizing Confucianist values and quality-of-life improvements, the CCP positions itself to, through effectiveness, engender support for the political system among society.

To conclude, this paper identified the shifts in Chinese political economy and the implications for the Party’s legitimacy under Xi Jinping. Using the theoretical framework of legitimation by means of effectiveness and overcoming critical societal issues, a historical analysis of legitimacy across Chinese history provided a foundation for framing the current ‘red flags’ of Chinese political economy in a historical context. This analysis established how the Party’s legitimacy evolved over time – from the “New China era” under Mao, to the “era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” under Deng – and argued that a new iteration of legitimacy coalesced under Xi Jinping’s rule. Faced with an unsustainable economy characterized by overinvestment, lack of innovation, and economic inequality, the previous source of legitimacy, economic growth, proves less promising. To complicate things further, an ageing population and a rising middle class puts added pressure on a state-capitalist system going through economic transformation. In overcoming the societal issue, the new iteration of Party legitimacy in the “era of socialism with Xi Jinping thought” sources legitimacy from nationalism of the previous “New China era”, along with traditional Confucian ideals of societal order and guardianship democracy.

Thinking of Party legitimacy in the context of effectiveness, societal perception, and critical societal issues, sheds light on the prospects of Xi Jinping’s success in overcoming the ‘red flags’ of China’s political economy. If the CCP is successful in overcoming slow economic growth and disruption to the status quo, legitimacy will be stable. If the rising middle class continues to be co-opted into the state-capitalist system and embraces guardianship values, the economic beneficiaries of the system will perceive trust in the political system. However, if the middle class continues to grow outside the Party state system, and material prosperity is attained in a private sphere, a majority of Chinese society could develop with a distinct cultural gap and lifestyle. To be sure, the middle class is much younger than the rest of the population, due to the rapid creation of the middle class and rapid growth of secondary and tertiary education.[[36]](#footnote-36)

These younger members of the middle class are more likely than their older counterparts to voice dissatisfaction with the political system (34.0 percent versus 27.9 percent), and more approving of liberal-democratic values (50.4 percent versus 44.5 percent).[[37]](#footnote-37) Additionally, those with higher education, especially college degrees, and younger cohorts are much less supportive of Confucian values.[[38]](#footnote-38) This could prove to be a challenge for legitimacy in the future if Confucian values of social order and hierarchy become less salient within a young, rising middle class. In this sense, a “revolution of rising expectations” challenging the government’s legitimacy is not an imminent threat, but might bare costs in the future with a new society, holding different expectations of government effectiveness.

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