Reviews

The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival, by Bruce J. Dickson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. vii+352 pp. £18.99 (cloth).

Bruce J. Dickson has long been interested in the future of China's political system. In his first book on this subject, *Democratization in China and Taiwan*, published 20 years ago, he questioned the common predictions that China would follow in Taiwan's footsteps and peacefully democratize. Contrary to the widely shared view that the Tiananmen crisis would force the Communist Party to democratize to have any hope of retaining power, Dickson concluded that the Party would be able to achieve high-enough levels of economic performance to obviate the need for democratization. He argued that democratic reforms "are unlikely to come under the sponsorship of the CCP; instead they are likely to come at its expense" (253) and were therefore improbable. Dickson has returned to the same topic in *The Dictator's Dilemma*. Once again he predicts the regime will endure and remains particularly skeptical about the prospects for democracy.

Dickson argues that the Party's longevity is the result of a complex strategy its leaders have developed, which has three elements: (1) adopting a "mass line for modern times" by consulting with the public on policy priorities, making government more transparent, and permitting the emergence of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) that cooperate with the government in addressing social problems; (2) "serving the people" by increasing individual and family incomes and providing a range of public goods that include health care, education, infrastructure, and more recently food safety and environmental protection; and (3) generating support not only by providing material benefits but also by promoting both nationalism and Confucian values.

Two sets of nationwide opinion surveys and focus groups conducted by Dickson in 2010 and 2014 show that this strategy has produced surprisingly high levels of support for the regime. Although Dickson acknowledges that the sensitivity of the questions may have led respondents to give responses that "they know not to be true but are the politically correct responses given to strangers" (220), he believes the results are generally valid, and indeed his findings are supported by other surveys of Chinese opinion.

Dickson acknowledges that there are contradictory elements in the regime's policies, and he defines the "dictator's dilemma" as striking the right balance among them: maintaining the coherence of the Party while coopting new elites, suppressing some types of dissent while allowing others, deciding which sources of information are acceptable and which are not, and admitting the existence of some severe social and economic problems without undermining the Party's claim to overall policy success.

Although the regime so far has managed this dilemma well, Dickson asks whether its strategy will be "indefinitely successful or simply postpone its inevitable demise" (x). More pessimistic observers like Minxin Pei and David Shambaugh have argued that China is unlikely to escape its emerging "middle-income trap" without more extensive political reform than its leaders now find acceptable. But Dickson assigns a higher probability to regime survival for three reasons: the regime's high levels of popular approval, the lack of popular interest in Western-style liberal democracy, and the absence of plausible scenarios for democratization.

On the first point, why are Chinese seemingly so contented with their government? Dickson finds they are satisfied with both their improving economic circumstances and the state's provision of public goods, although he notes there is less satisfaction with local authorities than with the central government. Second, and even more important, his surveys show that Chinese define democracy differently than in the West, in terms of socioeconomic outcomes rather than political processes. Thus, the Party's strategy of "serving the people" promotes the public perception that China is already highly "democratic," although Dickson cautions that this view is more widely shared among the less educated than the well educated (265–72).

These conclusions suggest some significant uncertainties regarding China's future. Given the importance Dickson assigns to rising family incomes and generous state expenditures on public goods, the likely slowing of the Chinese economy may pose real problems for the regime. And given the priority assigned to education, one wonders whether emerging generations of better-educated and more cosmopolitan Chinese will assign a higher priority to procedural democratization, as has been the case in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. Moreover, if significant numbers of people conclude that the problems they see around themselves are the result not just of the failures of local government but represent problems in the system as a whole, the regime's legitimacy may be called into greater question.

Even if such developments should occur, however, Dickson sees few scenarios that would lead China toward liberal, pluralistic democracy. He discounts the possibility of peaceful democratic reform from above (he sees no sign that any leader supports it) or a democratic transition that is negotiated between Party leaders and prodemocracy dissidents (there are too few of them). Far more likely would be a messy revolution from below that would force regime change on reluctant elites.

Dickson does not believe any of these hypothetical developments would lead to true democratization, since there are few if any leaders who could sponsor, design, and build democratic institutions to replace the Party. Therefore, in the unlikely event that the regime decays, collapses, or attempts to reform, the more probable outcomes would include an authoritarian system, perhaps drawing on some remnants of the present Communist order, or territorial disintegration. Both of these have arguably been the fate of the Soviet Union.

Dickson also doubts that other democracies provide many positive models for China, largely because of their political gridlock and economic failures: Japan's economy has stagnated for decades; a succession of South Korean presidents have been charged with corruption; and the "Arab Spring" is widely regarded as having failed. One might add that India's slower rate of growth and political gridlock is not an inspiring model either, nor is the ability of Western democracies to address the challenges of the high-income trap and the backlash against globalization. Chinese consider the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union to be an especially negative example, since it is associated with territorial fragmentation and the end of the country's role as a major global power. Most controversially, Dickson also dismisses the possibility that Taiwan could still serve as a model, since it has given rise to a local identity among Taiwanese and so supports an argument that democratization leads to national disintegration.

At several points Dickson claims that his analysis rejects what he describes as the prevailing scholarly analysis of China. He argues that, contrary to "conventional wisdom," the regime's survival is not based mainly on repression and aggregate economic growth but rather on improving the livelihood of individuals and families. Nor is the political system ossified; instead there has been considerable political reform, particularly with regard to the recruitment and rotation of political elites, and the tolerance of some aspects of a civil society.

The problem is that Dickson's characterization of the "conventional wisdom" (15–17) is somewhat exaggerated. As he acknowledges, serious observers are deeply divided about China's future prospects, indicating that there is no single "conventional wisdom" but several competing ones. Moreover, most scholars and analysts offer more nuanced characterizations of China than Dickson implies, acknowledging many of the same contradictions he describes. Dickson's book is therefore less a criticism of conventional wisdom in the academy than the exaggerated shorthand that characterizes much public discussion of China. In fact, since scholarly analysis of China has become more sophisticated over the past two decades, his earlier book was more a rejection of then-prevailing analyses than is this one.

Still, Dickson is correct in concluding that observers of China "need to be able to keep more than one idea in our heads at the same time, especially when those ideas are contradictory rather than complementary" (321). A related problem is

that too many forecasts of China's future are nonprobabilistic and noncontingent. They are flat predictions that China will collapse, democratize, or remain a stable adaptive authoritarianism. Dickson's great contribution is to reject this approach, assign different probabilities to different outcomes, and suggest some of the contingencies that could alter those probabilities. One may challenge the weights he gives to different causal factors or the probabilities he assigns to different scenarios, but few will question the comprehensiveness and insight of his discussion.

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Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability, by Wenfang Tang. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xi+ 220 pp. US$99.00/£64.00 (cloth), US$27.95/£18.99 (paper).

Wenfang Tang's *Populist Authoritarianism* is a provocative and useful book. Readers will find a great deal of data on public opinion in China and an interesting political culture thesis on the nature of China's authoritarian regime. Even readers who disagree with Tang's conclusion are likely to find his survey research valuable. The central findings are that the Chinese have a comparatively high degree of support for the Chinese regime and a relatively high degree of trust in each other. These findings are of interest because a great deal of political science literature suggests that these sorts of opinions are more typical of a "civic culture" and result from or lead to democracy. Chapter 5, which was written in collaboration with Joseph Zhou and Ray Ou Yang, is of particular interest because it provides a comparison of Taiwan and China and thereby controls for culture. The finding is, again, that PRC Chinese support their government substantially more and trust each other substantially more than do the Taiwanese.

The bulk of the book describes and analyzes the findings of Tang's survey research. It is beyond the scope of this review to offer more than a cursory account. Chapter 2, for example, looks at overall support for the regime, and despite finding that support for local governments is much weaker than support for the central government, concludes that there is little sign of a "coming collapse." Chapter 3 finds that Chinese nationalism is constructed by the Party and that Chinese are the most nationalist people in the world. Chapter 4 is about social trust and finds that previous literature linking social trust to participation in civic organizations and political participation cannot account for the high levels of trust in China, which suggests that democratic institutions are neither a sufficient nor a