



Bruce J. Dickson. The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival

Kenneth C. Walker

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East Asia

Bruce J. Dickson. *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016. pp. xii + 352. Figs. Tables. Notes. Appendices. Bibliog. Index. Hb. £18.99 / \$27.95. ISBN 9 7801 9022 8552

Bruce Dickson, Professor of Political Science at George Washington University, points out that, while the Chinese Communist Party uses repression as a means of maintaining its power, it also depends on popular support for its legitimacy. To a considerable extent, this has always been the case, although nowadays legitimacy is obtained mainly by satisfying the population's material needs rather than by ideological precepts as in the days of Mao Zedong.

Professor Dickson's study is as much about the strategy adopted by the Communist Party for its survival as about the choice of policies facing the top leader, currently Xi Jinping. Thus, the first part of the book's title is somewhat misleading unless the word 'dictator' is taken to mean the Party leadership as an institution. Admittedly, Xi Jinping is demonstrably concentrating power in his own hands to a greater extent than was done by his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. A particular dilemma on which Professor Dickson focuses is that faced by Xi between his effort to combat widespread corruption among Party and government officials and the need to maintain the Party's authority and prestige. But the main problems discussed are essentially those faced by the ruling élite as a whole, such as how to balance the need for some degree of liberalisation with popular acceptance of the Communist Party's dominance.

The Maoist idea that all activities are subject to the principle of 'politics in command' now commands less popular respect. As Dickson says, there have been some modest increases in the level of democracy – almost entirely at local levels – and ordinary people seem generally optimistic. He adds that many Chinese are unconvinced that Western-style democracy would be preferable to what they have. These conclusions are based on surveys of public opinion designed by the author and conducted in 2010 and 2014 in selected districts of 50 Chinese cities by personnel of Beijing University's Research Centre for Contemporary China. Among

the many topics addressed by the surveys were levels of income, family values, nationalism, experience of paying bribes, censorship, and demographic and geographical controls.

It might also be observed that there are striking differences between China's current condition and that of the Soviet Union before its collapse. In China, unlike in the former Soviet Union, living standards have steadily improved and national pride has been fostered by the country's increasing influence internationally. This reinforces a traditional sense of superiority felt by Chinese over smaller, less numerous nations near and far. Moreover, recent political trends in Western countries may have led to some increase in Chinese scepticism about democracy.

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Stein Ringen. *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2016. pp. xiii + 191. Notes. Bibliog. Index. Pb. £21. ISBN 9 7898 8820 8944

The year 2016 was a good one for Chinese studies, as leading scholars in the field published excellent works on the nature of the Chinese regime and its prospects for survival under Xi Jinping. Although Professor Stein Ringen is not a China scholar, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* is one of these notable publications that emerged last year.

In just 180 pages, the author offers a concise, yet detailed, introductory but also thought-provoking analysis of the Chinese polity, which might appeal to three audiences. First, for political scientists, the book offers an interesting framework of analysis for China's political system by using as comparative referents a diverse set of States that range from South Korea to Norway, and by examining rigorously the analytical value of terms such as 'dictatorship', 'authoritarianism', 'welfare state' and 'totalitarianism'. Second, for China experts, the book provides an intellectual opportunity for reflection on the macro-dynamics and trends impacting on the transformation of the Chinese polity, as for instance the rationale behind legal reforms. For the general reader and the new student of Chinese politics, the book provides with considerable accuracy an overview of key aspects of China's Party-State and offers an analysis