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Wright, Teresa, Accepting Authoritarianism: State-society Relations in China's Reform Era

Edward Friedman

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- 1 Wright, Teresa, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-society Relations in China's Reform Era*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 2010, 254 pp.
- 2 Teresa Wright contends that all China's diverse economic strata succeed by relying on the state. Therefore, they are not about to turn against their government. They "accept" the CCP because of how late industrialisation, state-led development, and socialist legacies combine to shape opinion.
- 3 Wright's choice of strata leads to a vision of China as half an onion, with only a few at the top and most people at the bottom, mainly workers and farmers. In contrast, Chinese sociologists include strata of unemployed and under-employed and see them as the narrow bottom of an olive-shaped society whose middle class should keep expanding. Wright never discusses why her approach to economic strata is superior, as it well may be, to that of Chinese government analysts.
- 4 Wright makes her argument by synthesising surveys, interviews, and statistics developed by the leading scholars of contemporary China. As a knowledgeable researcher, she puts her findings in comparative perspectives with early democratisers and late developers. Her important work merits grappling with. I learned something new from her on virtually every page.
- 5 Many analysts, however, see President Hu Jintao's stress on reducing inequality as a response to the regime's sense that people were no longer accepting the Party. So far, despite President Hu's measures, inequality has continued to worsen. In addition, in contrast to Wright's view, in which all strata accept the regime in the late reform era, many analysts find China's awesome dynamism unleashing such out-of-control forces that the future is wide open. The future then is not a matter of late reform era continuity.

- 6 Her over-arching thesis about acceptance is a bit fuzzy. Given that “acceptance” at times means mere toleration of the regime or a self-interested unwillingness at the moment to challenge the strong state, Wright cannot say how long “acceptance” will last. Minxin Pei sees China on the verge of explosions from below. Jinghao Zhou sees party decay as the CCP's future. Personally, I doubt that the future can be known. I expect it to surprise us.
- 7 This is not to suggest that the CCP regime is illegitimate. But Pyongyang is also legitimate. Given the disastrous nature of the DPRK economy, Wright's insistence that economic factors explain why the Beijing government is acceptable to the Chinese people seems strange. Both regimes, and Vietnam, established strong nationalist legitimacy by fighting wars against so-called imperialists.
- 8 To project a nation's future, one cannot merely explore, as Wright does, socio-economic factors. The state is a semi-autonomous entity, not just a superstructure reflecting the interests of an economic base. After all, China's economy in the reform era is a world away from that of the Mao era, and yet the CCP continues to hold a monopoly of political power.
- 9 Party power-holders in China have often declared that corruption could undermine their government. Wright's excellent work documents that cruel corruption. A survey not cited by Wright shows Chinese having more respect for prostitutes than for Party officials. When the state has sentenced to death a citizen who has murdered a CCP official or killed a police officer, a popular outcry has arisen on behalf of the murderer of the representative of the state. Does “acceptance” capture all key popular passions about the political system?
- 10 Despite the academic notion of two major Party factions in China, the popular view is that every Party power-holder is his own faction. Each serves mainly himself, his family, and his networks. As in 1989, Chinese see the wealth of the powerful as coming from these supposed “servants of the people swallow[ing] all the surplus value produced by the people's sweat and blood.”
- 11 People do not find Party leaders making a serious effort to tame the monstrous corruption. Instead, the regime treats corruption as an inevitable price of the economic transition, which will become manageable once China has modernised. The party centre, after all, did not publicise the anti-corruption Chongqing experience, despite the popularity of that effort to smash the mafia and expose the criminality of the police and judicial systems. When a leader is charged with corruption, Chinese cynically comment that the accuser is as corrupt as the accused, that the accused is merely the target of factional strife. Does “acceptance” capture Chinese attitudes toward the CCP?
- 12 High levels of the regime are concerned about CCP ossification. That is, as in the case of the post-Khrushchev USSR, entrenched interests are blocking necessary change. They resist attempts to cool down property bubbles when such policies get in the way of self-enrichment in shady land deals. Violent struggles over land occur daily throughout the nation.
- 13 Wright's economistic approach does not address inner party tensions that arise from corruption, ossification, popular rage, and violent struggles over land. But there are indications that reactionary forces in the regime have concluded that a corrupt China needs to be purified by emulating supposedly clean and healthy models of moral superiority such as North Korea, Che Guevara, and Mao Zedong. Wright quotes without

comment a Chinese analyst who sees China today looking ever more like “Germany before World War Two.”

- 14 Ignoring the possibility that China’s extreme and intensifying economic polarisation might be related to un-restrained greed within the Party system, Wright attributes the gross inequality to late industrialisation that empowers neo-liberal forces, a peculiar term to apply to China’s statist mercantilism. China’s New Left describes the country’s problems as rooted in neo-liberalism to hide the real root of the difficulties: the unaccountable interests of the Party dictatorship.
- 15 Wright cites early twenty-first century data showing that seven out of 20 entrepreneurs are Party members, compared with only one in 20 of the total population. The relevant comparison, however, contrasts independent entrepreneurs who do not come from Party families with the working-age population. Because power turns into wealth in CCP China, the vast majority of the rich have become so because they held Party power or family members did. Independent entrepreneurs are actually mistrusted by the Party. Such business people often try to keep a distance from the Party because they hate being ripped off by the corrupt CCP. Independent entrepreneurs actually experience discrimination, rather than being favoured as Wright contends.
- 16 The “late industrialisation” that concerns Wright begins only “in the 1960s.” But China rose by copying from and plugging into post-WW II Asia-Pacific economic dynamism, which also was not neo-liberal. Japan and the four Asian Tigers rose through the use of state-led development instruments because all could take advantage of post WW II factors, a strong US dollar, a US market open to foreign exports, and the pro-growth institutions of the Bretton Woods system. So could China. Wright’s notion of late industrialisation beginning in the 1960s, precisely when Fordist economics began to give way to a new economy of services and knowledge, usually called post-industrial, is mystifying.
- 17 Wright’s description of a healthy socialist legacy is even more confusing. A socialist agenda would emanate from unions organised by workers and by a political party responsive to union pressures and concerned about economic fairness. Socialism would not act detrimentally toward the poor. The rich-poor gap would not be growing. Socialism therefore has little to do with the PRC era dictatorship, which is quite rightist.
- 18 In Mao era China, villagers were locked up in the countryside in an Apartheid manner using the internal passports of the *hukou* system.¹ They could not move to the cities in search of better-paying jobs. Urban workers monopolised those jobs and their privileges. Urbanites considered “smelly” peasants a lesser race to whom one would not wish to marry one’s daughter. Poor villagers were imagined as lazy and thieving.
- 19 Urban state workers were what Lenin dubbed a labour aristocracy. These were feudalistic tendencies. From 1949 on, no national health care system offered the nation’s majority living in villages the coverage of state workers, including the aristocracy of labour.
- 20 Today, this labour aristocracy is nostalgic about the “socialism” of the Mao era. This so-called socialist legacy re-appears in continuing Apartheid efforts against rural migrants in the cities.

- 21 Write refers to this subsidised and privileged life of Mao era state workers as the lived experience of socialism. It certainly may be a way for former state enterprise employees to complain about the reform era policy of making enterprises self-sustainingly profitable by closing money-losing firms and laying off redundant staff.
- 22 But the lived experience of socialism includes stagnant miseries -- low wages, scarcities, ration coupons, long lines, and a joyless culture that took away the happiness and deep meaning of sacred moments of family and calendar, from marriage to New Year. Maoist socialism was inherently inhuman in quotidian ways, even if it had not also, in its most extreme practices, killed 40 million or so and shattered the lives of many tens of millions more. The reform era's trains packed with working people heading home during an extended New Year vacation and not locked out of family, in contrast to the Mao era's total control of residence and travel, is a measure of the far greater humanity inherent in the reform era's return of Chineseness.
- 23 In the Mao era, the socialist state determined where one lived and worked. People described themselves as turnips painfully trapped in cracks in the pavement. Careers open to talent in the post-Mao era, in contrast, are usually considered anti-feudal, progressive, and liberating reforms. But what Wright describes is a negative: people now "had to fend for themselves." She will not acknowledge the huge rise in human dignity facilitated by post-Mao policies that greatly expand personal freedoms, allowing people to travel, worship as they please, and plan their own and their family's futures.
- 24 Wright instead touts Mao era superiorities. She often cites the low Gini coefficient of pre-reform China as proof that socialism was egalitarian. But in the socialist era, which abolished money and market, power was all-determining. Inequality was absolute. It was a matter of life and death. In Mao's Leap famine, those connected to Party power usually survived. The powerless died in the tens of millions.
- 25 Whereas Wright claims that early post-Mao reforms "led to a dramatic increase in socio-economic inequality," in fact, all data show that policies privileging the rural poor dramatically narrowed the urban-rural gap between 1979 and 1984. Given that Lula in Brazil, another late industrialiser, has actually decreased inequality, the real source of growing inequality in China is not, as Wright wrongly claims, an economic abstraction known as late industrialisation, but rather the policies, interests, and institutions of China's Party dictatorship.
- 26 In sum, Wright's categories -- late (neo-liberal) industrialisation, statist development, and socialist legacies -- are notions that obscure the political sources of both better and worse, awesome growth and personal freedom, gross inequality and pervasive corruption. People in power in Beijing today may, from Wright's perspective, be paranoid to fear volcanic explosions from below. Wright may be correct that the Chinese people "accept" their government. But that is not all they do. I suspect that it is the factors sketched above, and not Wright's late reform continuities, that better explain why China's future will be full of wrenching surprises.

NOTES

1. See for example: Qin Hui, "Zhongzu geli shidai de Nanfei liudong gongren" (Migrant workers in South Africa during the Apartheid era), *Nanfang dushi bao*, 20 January 2010. Available via: <http://new.21ccom.net/plus/view.php?aid=6727#> (editor's note).