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The Modernisation of the People's Liberation Army
and its Repercussions

Guo Baogang, *China's Quest for Political Legitimacy: The New Equity-Enhancing Politics*

Lanham, Lexington Books, 2010, 216 pp.

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- 1 How does the Communist Party of China (CPC) manage to keep its hold on power and retain legitimacy after 60 years of leading the country under monopoly control? How to explain the popular backing it enjoys – perhaps now more than ever – as empirical studies show,¹ despite the exponential rise in the number of protests – 180,000 in 2010, or four times that in the previous decade and twice the number in 2006?²
- 2 For Guo Baogang, this is neither mysterious nor miraculous but can be explained with a change in analytical perspective. That the CPC is not endorsed through free and competitive elections does not render it illegitimate, in his view; on the contrary, the Party's longevity and popularity should make social science scholars rethink the legitimacy concept. Right from the outset, the book seeks to build a new analytical framework for better grasping the legitimacy of political authority in the Chinese case.

- 3 While it contains some shocking errors such as spelling the Chinese President's name as Hu Jingtao (p. 29 and 44), *China's Quest for Political Legitimacy* concisely and in a fluid style reviews the developments in and of post-Deng era politics. While it adds no new facts, the book makes for a ready reckoner on the last three decades' political history and is indispensable for anyone interested in contemporary China. After noting the different political philosophies holding sway since the late 1970s – from Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism to the new social contract at the end of the Hu-Wen era – (Chapter 2), Guo goes over the characteristics of the three generations of leaders who have led the country since Mao's death – “revolutionary modernisers” steered by Deng, the generation of technocrats headed by Jiang Zemin, and finally the “lost generation” (Chapter 3). Using the examples of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress (Chapter 4), as well as several scandals and conflicts resolved through dialogue between local governments and those concerned (Chapter 5), Guo shows that formal or informal consultations have multiplied and been institutionalised, helping represent the viewpoints of interest groups as well as of the public at large. Both at the top of the Party-state and at the level of the common citizen, there are nascent signs of a deliberative state, even a deliberative democracy in China. Inspired by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, theoreticians of deliberative democracy³ such as Joseph Bessette (who coined the term deliberative democracy⁴ or discursive democracy) and Joshua Cohen⁵ hold that the legitimacy of a policy decision resides *first and foremost* in the process of deliberation and less in the fact of being voted upon, contrary to democracy in its liberal form.
- 4 Guo pursues his reasoning by citing other examples of interactions between the Party-state and its local representatives and the citizens in each of the three major socio-economic undertakings that concern the leadership and could imperil the country's future: the environmental “new deal” (Chapter 6), labour relations (Chapter 7), and healthcare reform (Chapter 8). While there, the author highlights the juggling of two contradictory but nevertheless complementary tendencies: the policy of promoting efficiency and that stressing equity. The Party-state has successively favoured one or the other. Now the balance of power in itself reflects the regime's dynamism. No need for free and competitive elections in order to be deemed legitimate. By allowing more dialogue, consultation, and negotiation at all levels of the politico-social structure, the regime has entered another cycle of transformation aimed at strengthening and consolidating its legitimacy. In fact, conflicts are being resolved as increasing numbers of citizens, becoming active and feeling newly empowered, come to acknowledge, through engagement of their deliberative capacity, that the all-seeing and well-meaning regime is improving and doing its best while facing innumerable challenges to remake itself, thereby bestowing a veneer of legitimacy on one-party rule.
- 5 While civic activism and increasing consultation are in line with the embryonic stage of a deliberative democracy, Guo stresses that the main obstacle to this development is the regime itself, which is essentially authoritarian and within which those concerned cannot deliberate as equals. That China is evolving towards democracy, in whatever form – liberal or deliberative – is not the issue. For Guo, what matters to the CCP is to stay in power, and this requires boosting its legitimacy. This is the real end, and democratisation can only be one of many paths to get there. “The search for democracy has never been an end in itself,” be it in China or elsewhere, but rather a means of meeting the needs of different regimes (p. 184).

- 6 Guo's presentation errs through a certain culturalist bias of a condescending nature, not only towards those he calls "Western researchers" – assuming these indeed exist – but also towards the Chinese themselves. At several points, the author singles out Western scholars, implying that they cannot resist regarding the Communist regime in Beijing as illegitimate (p. 1) and are surprised that China is not yet a liberal democracy (p. 184). "Many Western scholars, who were indoctrinated by liberal legitimacy theories, have trouble comprehending the communist system of legitimation, especially in the context of Chinese political culture and history," he says (p. 189). The "Western researchers" lacking a critical spirit towards their so-called tradition would thus be culturally – if not also intellectually – limited in getting to grips with Chinese complexity! This is like saying an orchestra conductor has no ear for music or that an oenologist has no sense of smell... Scholars descended from the Yellow Emperor would thus be better equipped to hold forth on their country's political course, as they would be dealing with a cognitive model of a *strictly Chinese* political legitimacy, says Guo, adding: "A ruler, who has the mandate of Heaven, exercising benevolence, showing respect to his subjects, and maintaining a fair distribution of wealth can be rewarded with the affection of the people, and promote policies that will benefit and enrich the people, and allow the people to do what they do the best" (p. 12). In fact, contrary to what Guo would have us believe, his cognitive model of legitimacy (p. 33) is not part of the Chinese tradition: it is neither more nor less than the definition of enlightened despotism, the political doctrine originating with Enlightenment philosophers and adopted by several European monarchs, including Frederick II of Prussia and Catherine II of Russia. That is a crucial point missed by the author, who did his doctorate in political science in the United States, where he has lived and worked since 1986. But unlike Guo, few Western scholars would conclude that a Chinese scholar is less intellectually equipped than a Western one to grapple with the political history of that part of the world...
- 7 After all, enlightened despotism seemed so modern in its time and served as the last gasp in an attempt at refurbishing and justifying a monarchic system that was fast losing legitimacy. Since the eighteenth century, Europe has known countless upsurges and has given rise to a vast range of political dispensations, from monarchy to the republic, from the worst dictatorships to liberal democracies. While the Indignant Movement from Madrid to New York is proof that "indoctrinated" Westerners are quite capable of questioning the very foundations of the established order, the Arab Spring is further proof that the struggle for democracy is universal and that activism in favour of a democratic transition would by no means be foreign to China's own tradition. From the May Fourth Movement to Liu Xiaobo, there is continuity in the pro-democracy struggles among the children of the Yellow Emperor. Risking their own lives, they have risen against the model championed by Guo Baogang. Negating it would insult the memory of martyrs and condemn the continuing action of those still with us, including the 2010 Nobel Peace laureate as well as Ai Weiwei and countless others.

NOTES

1. Chen Jie, *Popular Political Support in Urban China*, Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson Center, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2004.
 2. According to Sun Liping, cited in *The Economic Observer*, 25 February 2011.
 3. Charles Girard and Alice Le Goff (eds.), *La Démocratie délibérative. Anthologie de textes fondamentaux* (Deliberative democracy: Anthology and basic texts), collection “L’Avocat du diable” (Devil’s advocate), Paris, Éditions Hermann, 2010.
 4. Joseph Bessette, “Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government,” in *How Democratic is the Constitution?*, Washington, D.C., AEI Press, 1980, pp. 102–116; *The Mild Voice of Reason: Deliberative Democracy & American National Government*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.
 5. Joshua Cohen, “Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Legitimacy,” in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (eds.), *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989 (1st edition), pp. 17–34.
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