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## **Authoritarian Resilience**

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Authoritarian Resilience

Andrew J. Nathan

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After the Tiananmen crisis in June, 1989, many observers thought that the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would collapse. Instead, the regime brought inflation under control, restarted economic growth, expanded foreign trade, and increased its absorption of foreign direct investment. It restored normal relations with the G-7 countries that had imposed sanctions, resumed the exchange of summits with the United States, presided over the retrocession of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, and won the right to hold the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. It arrested or exiled political dissidents, crushed the fledgling China Democratic Party, and seems to have largely suppressed the Falun Gong spiritual movement.

Many China specialists and democracy theorists—myself among them—expected the regime to fall to democratization's "third wave."<sup>1</sup> Instead, the regime has reconsolidated itself.<sup>2</sup> Regime theory holds that authoritarian systems are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralization of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms. This particular authoritarian system, however, has proven resilient.

The causes of its resilience are complex. But many of them can be summed up in the concept of institutionalization—understood either in the currently fashionable sense of behavior that is constrained by formal and informal rules, or in the older sense summarized by Samuel P. Huntington as consisting of the adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of state organizations.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on four aspects of the CCP regime's institutionalization: 1) the increasingly norm-bound nature of its succession politics; 2) the increase in meritocratic as opposed **[End Page 6]** to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites; 3) the differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime; and 4) the establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal that strengthen the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large. While these developments do not guarantee that the regime will be able to solve all the challenges that it faces, they do caution against too-hasty arguments that it cannot adapt and survive.

## Norm-Bound Succession Politics

As this article is published, the Chinese regime is in the middle of a historic demonstration of institutional stability: its peaceful, orderly transition from the so-called third generation of leadership, headed by Jiang Zemin, to the fourth, headed by Hu Jintao. Few authoritarian regimes—be they communist, fascist, corporatist, or personalist—have managed to conduct orderly, peaceful, timely, and stable successions. Instead, the moment of transfer has almost always been a moment of crisis—breaking out ahead of or behind the nominal schedule, involving purges or arrests, factionalism, sometimes violence, and opening the door to the chaotic intrusion into the political process of the masses or the military. China's current succession displays attributes of institutionalization unusual in the history of authoritarianism and unprecedented in the history of the PRC. It is the most orderly, peaceful, deliberate, and rule-bound succession in the history of modern China outside of the recent institutionalization of electoral democracy in Taiwan.<sup>4</sup>

Hu Jintao, the new general secretary of the CCP as of the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002, has held the position of successor-apparent for ten years. Four of the other eight top-ranking appointments (Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Zeng Qinghong, and Luo Gan) had been decided a year or two in advance. The remaining four members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) were simply elevated from the outgoing Politburo. Barring a major crisis, the transition will continue to an orderly conclusion in March 2003, leading to the election of Hu Jintao as state president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, Wu Bangguo as chair of the National People's Congress (NPC), and Wen Jiabao as premier. Outgoing officials President Jiang Zemin, NPC Chair Li Peng, and Premier Zhu Rongji will leave their state offices, having already left their Party offices in the fall, and will cease to have any direct role in politics.

It takes some historical perspective to appreciate this outcome for the achievement that...

## China's Changing of the Guard

### AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE

*Andrew J. Nathan*

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