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Ideological Reform and Political Legitimacy in China: Challenges in the Post-Jiang Era

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Abstract

As a Socialist country undergoing rapid social and economic transition, China presents a revealing case study on the role of ideology in the process of institutional change. Based on Douglass North's theory of institutional change and on David Beetham's theory of political legitimation, this paper argues that recent ideological reforms have been a crucial factor in sustaining the legitimacy of Communist party rule. Ideological change is conceived as a path-dependent process which helps to stabilize the social perception of transition and to frame the party's modernization achievements. At the same time, the dominant role of ideology makes the Chinese party-state, despite its economic success, more vulnerable to legitimacy crises compared to other authoritarian regimes.

Key Words: Institutional change, political legitimacy, ideology, Socialism, Communism, China

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Zusammenfassung

Ideologische Reform und politische Legitimität in China:
Das Erbe der Ära Jiang Zemins

Als ein sozialistisches Land, das eine rasante wirtschaftliche und soziale Transformation durchläuft, stellt China einen interessanten Fall für die Analyse der Rolle von Ideologie im Prozess institutionellen Wandels dar. Auf der Grundlage der Theorie institutionellen Wandels von Douglass North und der Theorie politischer Legitimation von David Beetham argumentiert der vorliegende Artikel, dass die ideologischen Reformen der letzten Jahre maßgeblich zur Aufrechterhaltung der Legitimität kommunistischer Parteiherrschaft beigetragen haben. Ideologischer Wandel wird als pfadabhängiger Prozess begriffen, der die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung des Transformationsprozesses stabilisiert und die Partei als zentrale Modernisierungskraft legitimiert. Zugleich führt die dominante Rolle der Ideologie aber dazu, dass der chinesische Parteistaat trotz seiner wirtschaftlichen Erfolge im Vergleich zu anderen autoritären Regimen anfälliger für Legitimitätskrisen ist.

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1. Ideology in Decay?
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No meeting that is not solemn
No closing that is not successful
No speech that is not important
No applause that is not enthusiastic
No leader that is not attentive
No masses that are not satisfied
[…]
Ideology is always adhered to
The road is always winding
The future is always bright
Socialism is always on the lips
The primary stage [of socialism] is always without an end
The study of "Three X" is always at its height![1]

1. Ideology in Decay?

There is a widespread conviction among Western China scholars that economic reforms in the PRC, over the past 25 years, have rendered ideology obsolete. According to conventional wisdom, economic performance is left as the only factor to bestow regime legitimacy to the Chinese party-state, implying that Communist one-party rule will immediately plunge into a serious legitimacy crisis should economic success falter one day. Ideology, on the other hand, is said to have degenerated from a set of formerly quasi-religious beliefs into a mere façade of a "Communist" regime that has long taken the "capitalist road".

This conventional wisdom contrasts with the enormous resources spent by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) day by day for the production, reproduction and reform of official discourse and ideology. Taking into consideration the time-consuming, labor-intensive practices to "spread the word" and make sure that relevant multipliers - media representatives as well as political, economic and social elites - grasp the "spirit" of current discourse and

[1] This satirical doggerel (*shunkouliu*) spread widely on the Chinese internet in early 2005. The original text was found on Qingnian luntan ("Youth Forum", http://bbs.ynet.com) and reprinted on hundreds of so-called "blogs" (short for weblog, a personal website updated frequently with links, commentary and any other information users want to make known to others). During this spreading process, the poem grew in length as "bloggers", based on the simple syntactic pattern, added their own verses to satirize party politics and official discourses. While the first six lines translated here are part of the original version, the latter six lines had been added later on (http://forum.blogchina.com/p601439.html; access 4.2.2005). The concept of the "primary stage of socialism" was introduced into CCP official rhetorics in 1986 to allow for a pragmatic and flexible introduction of market elements into the Chinese economy while upholding the teleological claim to realize socialism in a distant future. "The study of 'Three X'" seems to refer not only to the theory of "Three Representations" which is the object of analysis of this paper, but also to the vast array of formulas and slogans used in the Communist Party's education campaigns to render ideological formulas in a memorizable form (another recent example being the *san jiang* ("Three stresses" – stressing "politics, study and moral integrity") propagated by Jiang Zemin; cf. Holbig 1999).

know how to implement it correctly,[2] one has to wonder indeed how these huge investments should ever pay off if ideology, at best, remains an object of popular cynicism.

The following paper challenges this conventional wisdom and argues instead that in present-day China ideology – understood as a unified system of meanings for which political actors claim exclusive authority (cf. Herrmann-Pillath 2004: 13) – does indeed matter as an important factor for the ruling party to uphold its regime legitimacy. Based on Douglass North's theory of institutional change and on David Beetham's theory of political legitimation, the paper introduces a theoretical model to explain the mechanisms of generating regime legitimacy for one-party rule under the conditions of rapid economic transition. Using empirical data from the ideological campaign of the "Three Representations" introduced in early 2000 under party leader Jiang Zemin and reinterpreted under his successor Hu Jintao since fall 2002, the paper then demonstrates the relevance of ideological discourse in the real world of present-day China. It will show that the discourse of "Three Representations" and surrounding concepts not only attempt to reconstruct the legitimacy of CCP rule but also circumscribe the future path of ideological and institutional change.

2. Ideology Matters: The Path-Dependence of Ideological and Institutional Change

In his theory of institutional change and economic performance, Douglass North emphasizes the role of ideology[3] as an important factor shaped by and at the same time shaping the process of institutional change.

> "Ideas and ideologies matter, and institutions play a major role in determining just how much they matter. Ideas and ideologies shape the subjective mental constructs that individuals use to interpret the world around them and make choices. […] People's perceptions that the structure of rules of the system is fair and just reduce costs; equally, their perception that the system is unjust raises the costs […]."[4]

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[2] The CCP's propaganda system, which had been modelled closely on the Soviet system, has changed relatively little since the early years of the PRC. In his seminal monography on the Chinese propaganda system, Schurmann (1966) has described the main ideological principles and organizational structures which basically still hold today. For a more recent account of organizational structures cf. Wagner (1992).

[3] North defines ideology in a broad sense: "By ideology I mean the subjective perceptions (models, theories) all people possess to explain the world around them. Whether at the micro level of individual relationships or at the macro level of organized ideologies providing integrated explanations of the past and the present, such as communism or religions, the theories individuals construct are colored by normative views of how the world should be organized." (North 1990: 23, footnote 7). The more narrow definition of ideology given above as "a unified system of meanings for which political actors claim exclusive authority" is comprised in North's definition.

[4] North (1990: 76, 111).

According to North's theory, ideological change is determined by relative prices, i.e., the costs and benefits of maintaining an ideology. At the same time, due to their subjective nature ideologies mediate the very perception of relative prices, thus assuming a partly autonomous role in institutional change. In other words, by influencing the perceived costs of institutional change and the choices individuals make, ideology has a direct impact on institutional change (North 1990: chapters 9-11 *passim*).

To understand this basic relation between ideological and institutional change, case studies of countries undergoing rapid economic and social transition seem most fruitful. Transition-type systems are not only characterized by a high speed of institutional change, but at the same time by a high volatility of social perceptions of this change. Applying North's theoretical approach to transition-type systems, the perceived costs of institutional change can be expected to depend very highly on subjective assessments of relative prices of institutional change, thus giving ideology a most crucial role in mediating these perceptions.

The rapid economic and social transition we are witnessing in many post-Socialist and some remaining Socialist countries today poses a difficult test to regime legitimacy as social expectations of future institutional change are facing fundamental uncertainty. Specifically, transition challenges the perceived capacity of existing political institutions to guarantee compensation of the "losers" of transition. In this situation, the provision of a stable ideological discourse can play an important role as it may support the perception of sufficiently stable political institutions capable of arranging redistribution between different social groups. In other words, ideological continuity can help to stabilize social expectations and reduce anxieties and resistance particularly of those who find themselves among the less privileged in the transition process (cf. Herrmann-Pillath 2005). At the same time, however, official ideology has to be flexible enough to adapt to changing social values and expectations in order to support the perception of a "smooth" transition. If properly designed, ideological reform that is able to mediate the subjective assessments of the costs and benefits of transition may create manœuvring space for adapting institutional arrangements and enhance social tolerance of incremental institutional change.

Ideological continuity on the one hand and ideological adaptability on the other, via their impact on social perceptions and expectations of transition, thus determine the perceived costs and benefits of institutional change. In transition-type systems, the social perception of institutional change appears to be conditioned to a particularly high degree by ideological change which itself is determined by the perceived costs and benefits of maintaining the existing ideology. In this sense, we observe a path-dependence of ideological change, which in turn impacts upon institutional change. In other words, ideological change is a path-dependent process, which can be seen to circumscribe the corridor of institutional change.

3. Ideological Reform and Political Legitimacy in Socialist Systems

To understand more thoroughly the path-dependent character of the way institutional change and ideological change are interrelated, we need to look more specifically at the relationship between ideology and political legitimacy.

According to the classical work of Seymour Lipset, legitimacy can be most broadly defined at the macro level of political systems as "the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society" (Lipset 1981: 84).[5] While Lipset's research has concentrated on democratic systems and processes of democratization, this definition of legitimacy with its focus on political institutions can be applied universally to all kinds of political systems, be they democratic, authoritarian or positioned somewhere within the wide range of hybrid or transition-type regimes. However, if we agree with Douglass North that institutions have to adapt to an ever-changing environment, political legitimacy has to be constantly reproduced. Therefore, a dynamic version of the notion of legitimacy is necessary to allow for the conceptualization of institutional change.

David Beetham has presented a more detailed model of political legitimacy which takes into consideration the ongoing process of "legitimation" in terms of communicative interaction in society aiming at reproducing regime legitimacy, and of the role of ideology in this process. According to Beetham, irrespective of the political system, power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that (i) it conforms to established rules (*conformity of rules*), (ii) the rules can be justified by reference to shared beliefs (*justifiability of rules*), and (iii) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation (*legitimation through expressed consent*).

[5] The analytical range of is paper is restricted to the macro level of political systems. Schubert (forthcoming) presents a more comprehensive, and in parts complementary, theoretical model to analyze legitimacy at the micro level. Particularly, he looks at the interrelation between legitimacy and trust at the level of local communities which he illustrates with reference to the Chinese case by looking at the way trust is generated in rural grassroots communities through the institution of village elections.

Table 1: The three criteria of legitimacy

	Criteria of Legitimacy	Form of Non-legitimate Power
i	Conformity to rules (legality)	Illegitimacy (breach of rules)
ii	Normative justifiability of rules in terms of shared beliefs ◎ rightful source of political authority (popular sovereignty, natural law, scientific doctrine, divine command, traditional society etc.) ◎ proper ends and standards of government (demonstration of common interest, other performance criteria)	Legitimacy deficit (discrepancy between rules and supporting beliefs, absence of shared beliefs)
iii	Legitimation through expressed consent, recognition by other legitimate authorities	Delegitimation (withdrawal of consent)

Source: Adapted from Beetham (1991: 20, 72) and Beetham/Lord (1998: 9).

Conformity to established rules – be it formalized rule of law or informal conventions – is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for legitimacy. A breach of rules, however, will result in the perceived illegitimacy of political power (i). The second criterion implies the normative justification of these rules in terms of the rightful source of political authority and in terms of the proper ends and standards of government. In most "modern" states, according to Beetham, the propagation of governing for the "common interest" of society holds an important position in the justification of power. A legitimacy deficit will arise to the extent that the rules cannot be validated in terms of shared beliefs (ii). According to the third criterion of legitimacy, the withdrawal of popular consent, or the active articulation of dissent, will lead to the delegitimation of political power (iii) (Beetham 1991: 15 f.) (cf. Table 1).

All three criteria have to be fulfilled in order to safeguard the legitimacy of political power. On the other hand, the erosion of political legitimacy might start in one and then affect other dimensions, resulting in a vicious cycle. The collapse of communist systems in the Soviet Union and in other East-European countries suggests a specific pattern of potential legitimacy "breakdown": The process is typically triggered by a perceived failure of government to effectively pursue the "common interest" and other performance criteria (ii). The growing legitimacy deficit accentuates the lack of conformity of state power to constitutional or otherwise established rules (i) and thus further undermines its legitimacy. Lacking conformity to rules provokes active articulations of popular dissent (iii) which, in turn, escalate into open breaches of established rules by state power. This eventually leads to a widely perceived illegitimacy of political power (i) and to the total withdrawal of popular consent (iii) (Beetham 1991: chapters 1,2).

To maintain regime legitimacy and to avoid this vicious cycle of legitimacy breakdown in Socialist-type systems, ideology is assigned a crucial role: First, it has to provide the norma-

tive foundation for the rightful source of political authority; second, ideology has to define the performance criteria of government, particularly the "common interest" of society and how this goal should be pursued; and third, it has to serve as a stimulus to mobilize popular consent or, at least, assent of social groups relevant to legitimizing state power.

The Rightful Source of Political Authority

Ideological doctrines used in Socialist countries to define the rightful source of political authority have always been characterized by a formal paradox. While the dominant Communist party claims the monopoly of political power, formal principles of "democracy" and "popular sovereignty" are emphasized at the same time as important fundaments of this claim. This seeming paradox of "popular sovereignty under Communist one-party rule" can be resolved, however, by reference to the political analysis of Soviet-type regimes in Eastern Europe by Brunner and Markus in the early 1980s.

Georg Brunner's distinction between "autonomous-consensual" and "heteronomous-teleological" legitimacy doctrines is particularly helpful here. Brunner uses the notion of "heteronomous-teleological" legitimation to describe the typical legitimacy doctrines propagated in East European countries to justify the authority of the party under Communist one-party rule. Thus, in official ideology, historical materialism ("histomat") serves to establish the historical mission of the working class to carry out Socialist revolution, exercise leadership and realize the visionary goal of Communism as an objective, quasi-transcendental law. Building on this general social-philosophical context of legitimacy, the "Scientific Communism" shaped by Lenin's "doctrine of the party" confers on the Communist vanguard party a monopoly of knowledge (and an advanced consciousness vis-à-vis the population), which is then translated into a monopoly of leadership. Brunner characterizes these doctrines as "heteronomous" because they appeal to "objective laws" and thereby justify authority independently of any human decision; and as "teleological" as legitimacy is derived from the projection of the eschatological goal of the classless communist society (Brunner 1982).

This top-down mode of "heteronomous-teleological" legitimation has been supplemented in all East European countries by a mode of "autonomous-consensual" legitimation, that is, the bottom-up legitimation of state authority through the proclamation of the principle of popular sovereignty. In Brunner's words, "state authority is legitimate because it rests on the consent and the consensus of the people", a claim that has been enshrined in national constitutions of all Socialist countries in Eastern Europe (Brunner 1982: 33) and, in China, even in the very name (*People's* Republic of China). The typical "procedures used for producing autonomous-consensual legitimacy" identified by Brunner in various East European countries are: elections to popular representative bodies at different administrative levels, which

rarely afford the possibility of choice between political alternatives, but rather serve the goals of integration, mobilization and the demonstration of the unity of the people; public discussions of important draft laws; consultative referendums; reports to electors; as well as, last but not least, petitions and submissions by citizens (ibid.: 36-42). According to Maria Markus, another expert of Soviet-type regimes, it is precisely this combination of top-down (heteronomous-teleological) and bottom-up (autonomous-consensual) legitimacy doctrines which accomplishes

> "[…the] legitimation of a hierarchically downwards-oriented system of power and command in the name of a 'real' popular sovereignty. Official communist ideology thus transforms the principle of the sovereignty of the people into the sovereignty of the proletariat (on the basis of historical mission), and then, in a second step, the latter is transformed into the sovereignty of the party (on the basis of its specific knowledge), which confers on it the role of 'vanguard'). In this way a 'sovereign prince' [i.e., a sovereign party] is created though the 'modern' principles of [democratic] legitimation are *ideologically* preserved"[6].

It is very interesting to note here that the two modes of legitimation have been combined most neatly in the constitutions of most Socialist states in Eastern Europe as well as in the PRC: While the preamble of the Chinese constitution, for instance, elaborates in much detail the historical mission of the Communist Party and explicitly states its leadership monopoly (the "heteronomous-teleological" legitimation according to Brunner), the main body of the constitution does not mention the Communist Party at all. Here instead, the principles of popular sovereignty, culminating in the role of the National People's Congress as the "highest organ of state power", are reflected in a neat institutional order of civil rights and representative state organs (Brunner's "autonomous-consensual" legitimation).

While this pattern of normative justification of the Communist Party's rightful source of authority has been basically the same in all Soviet-type systems, efforts to adapt these doctrines to a changing environment have varied over time and across states. In the Chinese case, Communist ideology has been reformed in the post-Mao era and particularly in recent years by emphasizing formal elements of popular sovereignty, legal norms and constitutionalism. The explicit goal of these reforms, however, is not to signal an institutional shift to a multi-party democracy and rule of law regime, but to strengthen the normative and functional basis of one-party rule and the "party's capacity to govern". While this has resulted in a gradual reshaping of the landscape of political institutions (emphasizing rule by law and the authority of the constitution, upgrading the National People's Congress, promoting "intra-party democracy", stressing collective and transparent leadership) it illuminates at the

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[6] Markus (1982: 84) (italics in the original).

same time the path-dependence of institutional change which is anchored to the ideological repertoire of legitimacy doctrines justifying the rightful source of political authority.

Moreover, Communist legitimacy doctrines can be colored by informal traditional justifications of the rightful source of political authority. As Guo Baogang has shown with respect to the Chinese case, traditional concepts such as the "mandate of heaven" (*tian ming*), rule by virtue (*ren zhi*), popular consent (*min ben*) as well as early political theories of governing by established rules (*he fa*), "benefiting the people" (*li min*) and equal distribution (*jun fu*) have been reinvented time and again by the various leadership generations in the PRC as "modern" ideological norms to support the Communist Party's claim to power (Guo 2003). The "Three Representations", which will be object of the subsequent analysis, are a vivid illustration of a most intimate crossing of Communist and Confucian legitimacy doctrines justifying one-party rule.

Definition of "Common Interest" and Other Performance Criteria

Besides providing the normative justification of the rightful source of political authority, ideology has to justify the proper ends and standards of government by defining its performance criteria. In systems which are undergoing rapid economic and social change, this is probably the most challenging task of ideological reform. If it is true, as conventional wisdom holds, that economic performance in all modern states is the most important source of regime legitimacy (and the greatest danger to regime legitimacy if it is lacking), then ideology has a potentially crucial function in "framing" the success of transition and the achievements of economic performance, that is, to create a collective framework to perceive and interpret the ongoing transition process.[7]

Supposedly unambiguous concepts such as "economic growth", "social equality" or "government effectiveness" are actually quite complex notions that do not reveal themselves as objective realities to everyone in the same way. Particularly in transition processes which, by their very nature, tend to produce different social groups of "winners" and "losers" with antagonistic interests, the subjective assessments of what constitutes the "common interest" and the perceived costs and benefits of transition will hardly be the same for all these groups. Rather, such concepts represent socially constructed realities depending on mental

[7] On the theoretical concept of "framing" cf. Snow/Benford (1986); Klandermans (1988); MacAdam (1996); for an application to the Chinese case cf. Derichs et al. (2004: 40 f.).

constructs, cognitive schemes and social interests whose perception and interpretation can be shaped or "framed" by official ideology.[8]

As Beetham has concluded from the experience of former East European states, political legitimacy has often started to erode due to a perceived failure of state power to pursue the "common interest" – a core criterion of legitimacy in Socialist systems – and to fulfill other criteria of proper social and economic performance. To avoid a growing legitimacy deficit, ideology therefore has to adapt to a changing socio-economic environment and to be reformed time and again to frame the government's performance in a positive light. As will be shown in the Chinese case, economic performance and "successful" economic modernization have been employed for political legitimation by interpreting them in a way that is conducive to the role of the state as "modernizing" agency. Here again, the example of the "Three Representations" and surrounding concepts are illustrative.

Mobilization of Consent

Last but not least, ideology has to mobilize popular consent. According to Beetham's model, political legitimacy is not given once and for all, but demands ongoing legitimation through expressed consent. While in liberal democracies, consent is expressed mainly through an institutionalized system of elections (*electoral mode of popular consent*), in Socialist system it has typically been mobilized from above via ideological campaigns and other mass activities (anniversaries, rallies, work place activities etc.) launched and controlled by a tight hierarchy of party organizations reaching from the top level down to the grassroots of society (*mobilization mode of popular consent*). As observed above, although elections are formally institutionalized, they are rarely competitive but rather serve the goals of integration and the demonstration of the unity of the people. The positive legitimating effect assigned to this "mobilized" consent is reflected most clearly in the notorious efforts made by Socialist states to prevent the withdrawal of popular consent and the resulting delegitimation of political power. The regime is constantly on the guard against all kinds of dissenting discourses and activities and tries to suppress or, at least, to prevent them from entering the public. The rigid control of the public sphere in Socialist systems, therefore, should not be regarded as an alternative to the legitimation of political power, but rather as a its concomitant; legitimation and control are working hand in hand (Beetham 1991: 150-155, 179-188).

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[8] In this perspective, official ideology may serve as a functional equivalent to the "framing" process in democratic elections campaigns, when competing parties try to interpret economic performance in a way that is positively linked to their own past policies or future political agendas.

However, ideological commitment which is an important driving force in revolutions, is difficult to sustain after revolutions. As Douglass North has argued, this is particularly true for Socialist rule in the post-revolutionary period:

> "[…] Although ideological commitment is a necessary condition for mass support or a revolution, it is difficult to sustain. Giving up wealth and income for other values is one thing in the face of a common and hated oppressor, but the value of the trade-off changes as the oppressor disappears. Therefore, to the extent that the new formal rules are built on an incentive system that entails ideological commitment, they are going to be subverted and force reversion to more compatible constraints, as modern socialist economies have discovered."[9]

Facing this problem of decreasing returns on resources spent for ideological mass campaigns, Socialist systems have typically devised a strategy of segmentation, that is, deploying different legitimation modes for different sections of society: On the one hand, efforts to mobilize ideological commitment are focused on political elites, particularly on Communist party cadres who form the rank and file of the administrative staff at all levels of party, state and military hierarchies. Thus, ideological commitment of this elite cannot only be used as a test of political loyalty vis-à-vis the regime but also be publicized as representing the consent of the whole populace based on doctrines of the Communist Party as "vanguard" of the masses.

For the rest of society, on the other hand, many former Soviet-type regimes have deployed a less costly mode of legitimation that Ferenc Fehér has labeled "paternalism": To safeguard at least the tacit assent of the "masses", people are provided basic existential guarantees and a restricted range of choice regarding their basic needs in exchange for social immobilism and political loyalty (Fehér 1982). While this mode of paternalism remains short of legitimation through expressed consent, it still has proved to be a rather stable mode of legitimation, provided sufficient legitimacy can be generated via government performance. As will be shown below, however, the Chinese case is different from the experience of former Soviet-type countries, as economic reforms have eroded the basis of paternalist legitimation and social immobilism and instead paved the way for some liberal elements into the otherwise authoritarian ideological framework of Chinese Socialism.[10]

Before concluding this theoretical discussion it is important to note that, in order to fulfill its legitimating functions it is not necessary for ideology to be internalized by the whole populace in the sense of deep-rooted ideological beliefs and convictions. Rather, ideology can be expected to be "effective" in the sense that it serves as a symbolic resource for the formation

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[9] North 1990: 90 f.

[10] For a discussion of the introduction of liberal elements into Chinese political discourse cf., for example, Sigley (2004) or Tomba (2005).

of public opinion and as a frame for the social construction of reality (Herrmann-Pillath 2005; Wohlgemuth 2002). To be sure, the ideological hegemony claimed by Communist Parties in the public sphere almost systematically tends to produce a cynical discourse. James Scott has described the emergence of "hidden transcripts" behind the "public transcript" of official discourse:

> "The plasticity of any would-be hegemonic ideology which must, by definition, make a claim to serve the real interests of subordinate groups, provides antagonists with political resources in the form of political claims that are legitimized by that ideology. Whether he believes in the rules or not, only a fool would fail to appreciate the possible benefits of deploying such readily available ideological resources."[11]

Typically, the "hidden transcripts" take the form of "rumours, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, euphemisms [...]", genres which share as a common characteristic the fact that they can be articulated in the public sphere and disguise their authors at the same time. The doggerel cited at the beginning of this paper illustrates this mechanism in a most exemplary manner. By invoking elements of Communist party rhetoric, it satirizes the official discourse. At the same time, the anonymous text masks its authors and shields them from repression. While this kind of "hidden transcript" may become an apt symbolic repertoire for the active articulation of popular dissent once regime legitimacy starts to break down, over the longest periods of Socialist rule it has rather served to ventilate popular grudges and thus to stabilize party hegemony in the public sphere. In a way, cynical interpretations of official discourse can therefore be seen to confirm rather than to subvert the role of ideology in shaping public opinion and framing social perceptions of reality.[12]

While the role of ideology in (re)producing regime legitimacy should not be overestimated, the vast resources spent for the formulation and propagation of ideology do in some way "pay off". Particularly in systems that are undergoing rapid economic and social transition and thus leave people with fundamental uncertainties concerning future institutional change, ideological reform may help to legitimize political power by stabilizing social expectations, smoothing the transition process and framing the perception of the state's modernizing achievements.

At the same time, the multiple tasks official ideology has to shoulder explain the vulnerability of Socialist systems. As Lance Gore has concluded from the collapse of Socialism in the

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[11] Scott (1990: 95).

[12] Similarly, though in a non-cynical way, ideology can be exploited by specific social groups to organize and vocalize their concerns. Referring to pensioners' protests in China, Carsten Herrmann-Pillath argues that official ideology enables this group (one of the most negatively affected by economic transition) on the one hand to legitimize their protests by pinpointing their past contributions to building the Socialist state, while, on the other hand, the protests contribute to ideological continuity by legitimating their claims by the reigning ideology (Herrmann-Pillath 2005).

Soviet block in 1989, the dominant ideology played a critical role in both the existence and the demise of communism. The ideological pursuit of an ideal society and the long-held claims of moral and economic superiority had long been contradicted by the consequences of a highly-centralized political system – a vast bureaucracy breeding corruption and power abuse, social division and economic stagnation. The seemingly bottom-up revolution of 1989 was not, according to Gore, caused in the first instance by moral indignation, widespread disappointment and frustration of the people. Rather, it was initiated by segments of the ruling elite who, in order to cope with these perennial problems, had taken to reforms which reformulated or even renounced the sacred tenets of the ruling ideology and led to wholesale abandonment of the Communist ideal (Gorbachev's *Glasnost* being the most illustrative example). Ideological reform thus highlights the "Achilles heel" of Socialist systems which depend very much on official ideology to maintain regime legitimacy. Compared to other, mostly "weaker" authoritarian systems, Socialist systems are therefore much easier thrown out of balance once reforms extend beyond the Communist grand tradition and the ruling ideology is unraveled (Gore 2003).

4. The "Three Representations": Populist Re-interpretation of an Elitist Concept

Ideological reforms undertaken by the Chinese leadership in recent years reveal the role of ideology in maintaining political legitimacy. A prominent example of the delicate balance struck in the course of rapid transition in China between ideological continuity and adaptability is the formulation and re-interpretation of the theory of "Three Representations". The precise wording of the formula has remained constant since its first formulation by the former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin in early 2000. The official definition goes:

> "'Three Representations' (*san ge daibiao*): on the importance of the communist party in modernizing the nation – representing the demands for the development of advanced social productive forces [1], the direction of advanced culture [2], and the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people [3]."[13]

The message as well as the usage of the discourse, however, have changed significantly since then. In the following, the changing discourse of the "Three Representations" will be analyzed with respect to its specific role in framing the CCP's rightful source of authority, (re-)defining the "common interest" and mobilizing popular consent. It will be shown that the discourse has been highly relevant for reproducing the legitimacy of party rule, while at

[13] Xinhua, February 25, 2000, April 18, 2000.

the same time it has circumscribed a very narrow corridor for institutional change of the political system.

Rightful Source of Authority: Framing the CCP As Ever-innovative Organization

Since its very launch in early 2000, the concept of "Three Representations" has been advertised as the core of an ideological reconstruction of the CCP's legitimacy as ruling party: In the words of Jiang Zemin, the "Three Representations" is the "foundation for building the party" (*li dang zhi ben*), "the cornerstone of its governance" (*zhizheng zhi ji*), and "the source of its strength (*liliang zhi yuan*) (Lu Hao 2001). Most interestingly, in the discourse of "Three Representations", legitimacy is not claimed with reference to the CCP's long revolutionary history and firm ideological dogmas, but, to the contrary, by emphasizing the innovativeness of party theory and the vitality of the CCP resulting from its ability to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

At the time, commentators suggested that the new concept – which in spring 2000 became a mandatory study object for party cadres nation-wide – was a last attempt by the party's "third-generation leader" Jiang Zemin to leave his personal imprint on party theory before handing the leadership over to his successor. By ascribing to the "Three Representations" a canonical status equal to Marxism-Leninism, "Mao Zedong Ideas" and "Deng Xiaoping Theory", Jiang Zemin was said to claim a position in CCP history equal to that of his predecessors (Holbig 2000). Irrespective of these speculations about Jiang Zemin's personal ambitions, of course, the media were eager to publicize the new concept as an innovative product of the collective wisdom of party leadership.

The very message of ideological innovativeness also underlay Jiang Zemin's legendary speech on July 1st, 2001, celebrating the 80th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. In the introductory part of his two-hours speech, Jiang emphasized the undogmatic approach of the CCP leadership to adapt party theory to a changing reality:

> "The practice of the eighty years tells us that it is imperative to always persist in integrating the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism with the specific situation in China, persist in taking scientific theories as guide and unswervingly follow our own road. […] Marxism is not a dogma. Only by being correctly applied and constantly developed in practice, does it exhibit great vitality. […] The key to upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought in the new historical period lies in persistent use of Deng Xiaoping Theory to observe the present-day world and contemporary China, incessantly sum up practical experience and generalize it in the new theoretical light and open up new ways forward. […] In terms of theory, Marxism develops with the times. If we dogmatically cling to some individual theses and specific programs of action formulated for a special situation by authors of Marxist classics in the specific historical conditions in spite of the changes in historical conditions and present realities,

> then we will have difficulty in forging ahead smoothly and we may even make mistakes because our thinking is divorced from reality."[14]

As this rhetoric reveals, while the continuation of traditional doctrines (Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory) is given due respect, emphasis is put on signalling the ever-innovative character of party ideology. Stated in a dialectical logic, the basic tenets of party theory can be upheld only by constantly adapting them to reality. In the language of Beetham's model of political legitimacy described above, the CCP's rightful source of authority is thus justified dynamically in terms of its ideological adaptability, that is, the capability to apply its historically derived monopoly of knowledge in an innovative manner. The "Three Representations", however, do not only signal the innovative character of CCP rule at a rhetorical level. As will be shown below, at least in the early version presented by Jiang Zemin, the notion itself presents a manifestation of this claim by introducing an innovative interpretation of the "common interest" represented by the CCP.

Elitist Redefinition of Common Interest: Jiang Zemin's Theoretical Breakthrough

That Jiang Zemin's speech of July 1st, 2001, received so much domestic and international attention was mainly due to the fact that it could be read as clear evidence of the CCP leaders' willingness to expand the ruling constituency of the party and to justify the recruitment of new economic elites, particularly of private entrepreneurs (Lin Gang 2003). Less attention, however, has been given to the ideological operations behind this "breakthrough" in party theory. A more detailed analysis of Jiang Zemin's speech is therefore necessary to comprehend the underlying theoretical arguments as well as their practical implications.

Within the rhetorical framework of the "Three Representations" presented in Jiang Zemin's speech, the emphasis is clearly on the CCP's representation of the development of "productive forces" (1). Attention is thereby shifted away from the corresponding notion of the "relations of production" which, according to Marxism-Leninism, create the contradictions between classes and determine whether a social system is either Capitalist (exploitative) or Socialist (non-exploitative). By actively supporting the development of the most "advanced" production forces, class struggle becomes irrelevant.[15] The conceptual shift away from Marxist class theory allows then to frame the coexistence of different "social strata" (*shehui jieceng*), including the "new social strata" – among them entrepreneurs and managers – in a

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[14] Cited from the official English translation of the Jiang Zemin's speech given in XNA, July 1, 2001.

[15] With this emphasis on production forces, Jiang Zemin builds on the formula of "Three benefits" (*san ge li*yu) introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s. According to this formula, the standard to measure whether an ownership system was good or bad was "whether or not it benefits the development of productive forces in a Socialist society, the improvement of overall national strength, and the improvement of people's lives"; cf. Holbig 2002.

positive light. Even more, the representation of the "new social strata" (not to speak of classes any more) as the "most advanced productive forces" according to this logic becomes the foremost task of the CCP and the precondition to live up to the third proposition of the "Three Representations", that is, the representation of "the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people" (*zui guangda renmin de genben liyi*) (3).

As sensitive Chinese readers seem to have understood very early on, this notion of "the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people" (3) – which at first glance simply appears to repeat the Maoist concept of the "mass line" – implies a substantial redefinition of the "common interest" represented by the party. In former revolutionary visions, the CCP had defined itself as the "vanguard of the working class" in the sense of the majority of (proletarian) workers and peasants led by a revolutionary elite. In the early reform period, the very category of the "working class" was expanded to include intellectuals – a far-reaching signal to rehabilitate a group which had been purged since the late 1950s and particularly during the Cultural Revolution due to its "bourgeois-liberal" class background. Most interestingly, during the months preceding the official launch of the "Three Representations" in early 2000, state media hailed the positive role of Chinese intellectuals as harbingers of the Communist movement in the first half of the 20th century. An article published by a prominent party theorist in the journal "Theoretical Trend" (*Lilun Dongtai*) in fall 2000 discussed the inclusion of intellectuals and other professional elites – among them entrepreneurs and managers – into the "working class" in a positive light and thus paved the way for a new round of redefining the "common interest" represented by the CCP.[16]

Building on this experience of one and a half years of internal discussion among party theorists, Jiang Zemin's speech of July 1st, 2001, indeed marked a theoretical breakthrough by expanding the ideological concept of the "working class" in a way that allows to include the new economic elites. As formulated in Jiang Zemin's speech, the "greatest majority of the people" comprises in particular

> "[…] entrepreneurs and technical personnel employed by scientific and technical enterprises of the non-public sector, managerial and technical staff employed by foreign-funded enterprises, the self-employed, private entrepreneurs, employees in intermediaries, and free-lance professionals."[17]

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[16] The role of intellectuals during the Republican Period (1912-1949) has long been treated in a highly ambivalent manner. This is mainly due to a ambiguous interpretation of the May Fourth Movement as harbinger of national modernization on the one hand and as rebellious movement on the other. Since 2000, the first interpretation of the May Fourth Movement as an icon of modern China has been emphasized in official discourse, obviously with the goal to depict the role of Chinese intellectuals in an unambiguously positive light. Cf. Derichs et al. (2004: 122 f., 162).

[17] XNA, July 1, 2001.

In a most conspicuous disguise, entrepreneurs and managers are grouped together with all kinds of professional employees to form a kind of white-collar elite without a particular "capitalist" class background. Semantic operations support this blurring of ideological boundaries between "capitalist" and "proletarian" categories. A crucial passage in Jiang Zemin's innovative delineation of the "working class" states:

> "Now, we have adopted the basic economic system under which public ownership plays a dominant role in the national economy while other forms of ownership develop side by side. […] Consequently some workers have changed their jobs. But this has not changed the status of the Chinese working class. On the contrary, this will serve to improve the overall quality of the working class and give play to its advantages as a group in the long run."[18]

In other words, entrepreneurs are rendered as "workers who have changed their jobs" (*yixie gongren qunzhong de gongzuo gangwei fasheng bianhua*, literally: "some among the working masses have experienced changes in their job placements) simply by chance in the country's transition from plan to market economy. Connotations of the "exploiting", "capitalist" class that were almost automatically associated with private entrepreneurs in Marxist and Maoist discourse are thus totally avoided. Based on these theoretical arguments and semantic operations, the CCP's ruling constituency is ideologically reconstructed to represent private entrepreneurs and managers without giving up its original role as "vanguard of the working class". According to this new definition of "common interest", the CCP claims no longer to represent the "revolutionary forces" of proletarian workers and peasant, but instead a new trinity of political, intellectual and economic elites (compare also Lin Gang 2003). While formally justifying the CCP's political authority in the name of representing the interests of the whole "Chinese nation", legitimacy of CCP rule is thereby tied to its mission of economic modernization, a mission that gives priority to the interests of the new economic and professional elites.

Mobilization of Consent: Populist Re-interpretation Under Hu Jintao

This elitist definition of the "common interest" implied in Jiang Zemin's version of the "Three Representations" was confirmed very clearly by the strong resistance the concept met not only inside the CCP but also in the populace. Among the earliest evidence of criticism inside the party was an article in a party theory journal by Zhang Dejiang, then party secretary of Zhejiang province (the cradle of private business in China) in summer 2000. He accused the party leadership of "muddle-headed thinking" which overlooked the fact that

[18] Ibid.

private entrepreneurs were indeed private owners of the means of production and therefore could not legitimately be recruited into the party. "Otherwise", Zhang Dejiang warned,

> "it will make indistinct the party's nature and its standard as vanguard fighter of the working class and mislead people into thinking that 'he who is rich has the qualifications to join the party'. The basic masses of workers and peasants who knew just too well the pains of what it was like in the old society when people fawned on the rich and looked down on the poor would be led to misunderstand the party ideologically and distance themselves from the party emotionally. This will affect and weaken the mass basis of the party"[19].

In June 2001, party theorist Lin Yanzhi formulated an even harsher criticism of Jiang Zemin's proposal to allow "capitalists" into the party. According to his view, the "Three Representations" had brought about an "erroneous situation" which resulted from confusing production relations with essential factors of production and extrapolating an erroneous understanding that "current capitalists are laborers". Instead of allowing the "nascent class of capitalists" into the party, the CCP had to control and lead this emergent class in order to manage economic development and prevent social polarization.

> "If we allow the party of private entrepreneurs in, this will be equivalent to wasting the important historical experiences and lessons of the party. If we heal old wounds and scars and forget our pain so quickly, this will cause the people to feel concerned about whether we have the ability to handle new and complicated scenarios. If we allow the party of private entrepreneurs in, it will create serious conceptual chaos within the party, and destroy the unified foundation of political thought of the party that is now united, and break through the baseline of what the party is able to accommodate in terms of its advanced class nature. […] Expanding opportunities for private entrepreneurs to join the party carries the important function of 'sowing discord', or sowing discord between the party and its relationship with the masses of workers."[20]

What we find in these passages are explicit warnings that the "Three Representations", with their new definition of "common interest" as advocated by Jiang Zemin, have crossed the boundaries of "proper" ideological discourse and thus have endangered the political legitimacy of CCP rule – evidence that fears of a looming legitimacy crisis are clearly in the minds of Chinese party leaders. Also, it is interesting to note that this harsh criticism is based on "traditional" Marxist class analysis, an approach, as was shown above, intentionally avoided by the authors of the "Three Representations". Obviously, proponents and opponents of the

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[19] Zhang Dejiang's article appeared first in *Dangjian Yanjiu* (*Research on Party Building*), issue 4, summer 2000. It was reprinted in May 2001 (still before Jiang Zemin's July 1st speech) in *Zhenli de zhuiqiu* (*Pursuing Truth*). The English translation is cited from BBC Monitoring Global Newsline Asia Pacific Political File, July 14, 2001.

[20] Lin Yanzhi (2001), English translation cited from BBC Monitoring Global Newsline Asia Pacific Political File, July 16, 2001.

new concept are not only clinging to different ideological doctrines but, as a consequence, they are also speaking in different "tongues" which appears to have made theoretical debate inside the party very difficult. While bitter controversies seem to have revolved around the specific criteria for admission into the CCP of "outstanding elements from the new social strata" (cf. Holbig 2002), widespread resistance could not hinder the "Three Representations", which were supported by Jiang Zemin and his allies in the party leadership, to enter the party constitution. After two years of internal debate, the "important thought of Three Representations" was enshrined into the party constitution at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 – as personal legacy of retiring CCP general-secretary Jiang Zemin –, and with it the possibility of the admission of "workers, peasants, soldiers, intellectuals *and progressive elements from other social strata*" into the CCP's party statute.[21]

While the political career of the "Three Representations" had remained an object of discussion mainly among party insiders, public controversies were aroused when the new concept, together with provisions to protect private property rights, was prepared to be introduced into the Chinese constitution. Since late 2002, and through the following year, the Internet was a welcome forum for educated elites to ventilate their anger against what they regarded as state protection of the exploiting classes and their illegally generated incomes. A Beijing high school professor in December 2002 warned publicly of a looming "capitalist fascist dictatorship" (Kuang Xinnian 2002), and other Internet users followed in 2003 to rage against the "nouveaux riches" and "capitalists" who had made huge profits by criminal means and now even found their way into the establishment of the Communist party which was doomed to degenerate with the admission of capitalists. Public anger grew so vociferous that the party leadership decided in August 2003 to prohibit further debate of the issue in the media, in party organizations and in academic circles and to effectively ban all public discussion of the topic (Heilmann/Schulte/Kulkmann 2004).

Faced with the delegitimating potential of such vehement articulation of dissent inside and outside the CCP, the new party leadership under Hu Jintao, while it could not openly work against Jiang Zemin's legacy, took to a populist re-interpretation of the "Three Representations" in order to prevent a further withdrawal of popular consent. At first glance, the new leadership has opted for ideological continuity at least formally in that the slogan remained omnipresent in official discourse. Due to their prominent position in the party constitution, the "Three Representations" have formed a reliable stereotype in documents emanating from the party leadership and in official media coverage since late 2002 until now. Accordingly, the "Three Representations" have become a core element of the basic knowledge which has to be mastered to qualify for CCP membership as well as for higher posts in the

[21] CCP Party Constitution, revised version of November 2002, Article 1.

party's hierarchy.[22] At the same time, however, if we look at the new authoritative exegesis of the canonical text of the "Three Representations", we find a subtle re-interpretation of the formerly elitist notion in more orthodox populist terms. Rhetorically, this is done by shifting the emphasis from the "first" to the "third representation", that is, to the "representation of the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people".[23] The complex theoretical edifice built under Jiang Zemin to allow for the admission of new economic elites into the CCP while upholding its role as "vanguard of the working class" (and of the whole Chinese nation) has been rendered more or less obsolete since Hu Jintao assumed power. Instead, the "Three Representations" have been boiled down to an ideological formula generally reflecting a new "people-centered" mentality of the fourth generation leaders.

Thus, in a speech at a seminar on the important thinking of the "Three Representations" in February 2003, Hu Jintao translated the "Three Representations" into the "Three People": The party must "exercise its power for the people, have passion for the people, and seek benefits of the people" (*quan wei min suo yong, qing wei min suo xi, li wei min suo mou*) (RMRB, February 19, 2003). Similarly, the essence of the "Three Representations" since late 2002 has been widely interpreted in official discourse as "establishing a party that is devoted to the public interest and governing for the people" (*li dang wei gong, zhizheng wei min*) (RMRB, July 2, 2003). In a speech given by Hu Jintao in February 2005, the "Three Representations" formula is conspicuously absent from a eulogy of Jiang Zemin's contribution to party theory. Instead, it is employed only in later paragraphs as a general guiding thought for social construction under the new leadership generation. With this disconnection of the "Three Representations" from Jiang Zemin's authorship, the elitist notion of the concept seems to have lost most of its former ideological and political relevance (RMRB, June 27, 2005).

The populist re-interpretation of the "Three Representations" sounds very much like a face-lifted version of Maoist tenets such as "serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu*), the "mass line" (*qunzhong luxian*), the party's "flesh-and-blood ties" (*xue rou lianxi*) with the masses, or even older traditional concepts such as "popular consent" (*min ben*) or "benefiting the people" (*li min*). Among others, these traditional concepts have been identified by Guo Baogang as elements of a specific cultural repertoire of legitimacy doctrines, mostly derived from Confucian and other philosophical thoughts of ancient China, and used time and again by

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[22] E.g., a manual for admission of new members into the CCP published in 2003 gives much prominence to the "important thinking of the 'Three Representations'"; Yue Qiwei 2003.

[23] In an official explanation of the "Three Representations" published in summer 2003 in a manual designed for prospective CCP members, the "first representation" is described as a "very trivial principle" (*daoli shifen jiandan*), while the "third representation" is stressed as the precondition and ulterior guarantee of the "people's full-hearted endorsement and support" (*qunzhong zhongshi yonghu he zhichi*); Yue Qiwei (2003: 15 f.).

various leadership generations in the PRC to justify their rule (Guo 2003). From the perspective of maintaining political legitimacy, Hu Jintao's people-centered policy with its Confucian-Communist blend of imperial and Maoist legitimacy doctrines thus appears as a rational reaction to what seems to have been perceived as a looming legitimacy crisis in the wake of Jiang Zemin's elitist re-definition of the "common interest". The "Three Representations" seem to have been re-interpreted under Hu Jintao in a way that aims to re-justify Communist party rule in terms of tried and tested norms of the rightful source of authority and common interest in order to counter the risk of widespread withdrawal of popular consent.

In addition, the populist re-interpretation of the concept serves to re-mobilize popular consent or, at least, the consent of the rank and files of party cadres who are claimed to ideologically represent the whole populace. As a most illustrative example of this mobilization role of ideology, the "practice of the important thinking of the 'Three Representations'" has been chosen as the main content of a "party-wide education campaign to maintain Communist Party members' advanced character" launched by the CCP in January 2005. More than 70 million members of the CCP will be mobilized to actively express their consent and ideological commitment during this education campaign which is scheduled to end in mid-2007 – right in time to celebrate the party's 85th anniversary on July 1, 2007.[24] By focusing its mobilization efforts on cadres, the party assigns to this elite an important role as "interpretive community" to validate the legitimacy of CCP rule – a role that might as well backfire in the future should further ideological reforms be judged as inadequate by this community.[25]

5. Grappling With Ideological Innovation: From "Three Representations" to a "Harmonious Socialist Society"

While reviving traditional legitimacy doctrines to support its new populist outlook and thus to re-mobilize popular consent, the new leadership also seems eager not to lose the aura of innovativeness that had been ascribed to the formula under Jiang Zemin. As reflected by an article in *People's Daily* of July 2005, state media are still stressing the innovative and "scientific" character of the "Three Representations":

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24 Cf. Holbig (2005a); cf. Xinhua, June 27, 2005.

25 The theory of interpretive communities has been introduced by Fish (1980). According to this theory, meaning is not created by texts, but by communities of readers sharing a common set of interpretive strategies. For an application of the concept to the field of legal reform in China cf. Potter (2004).

> "The important thinking of the 'Three Representations' has for the first time […] profoundly revealed the scientific connotation of the party's progressiveness from the angle of the combined intrinsic quality and actual role of a Marxist party, and clearly answered the questions of what the party's progressiveness is and how to maintain it under new historical conditions."[26]

As this passage reveals, while the "Three Representations" have been re-interpreted in populist terms, they are still employed to reflect the Party's effort to reconstruct the CCP's legitimacy as a ruling party capable of ideological and institutional innovation. To substantiate this claim of innovative party-state rule, other, more specific concepts have been introduced in official discourse over the past years under Hu Jintao.

One of these new concepts is the so-called "scientific development concept" (*kexue fazhan guan*) of "comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development" which was formulated in early 2004 and adopted as new guideline for social and economic development by the National People's Congress in March of the same year.[27] The new concept received positive publicity among international donor organizations, as it appeared to react in a constructive manner towards long-standing criticisms by Western economists that China's quantity-driven growth could not be maintained forever. By stressing ecological and other qualitative aspects of economic and social development and by integrating the term of "sustainable" (*kechixu*) development into official policy, the Chinese leadership seemed to demonstrate its innovative capacities. In the domestic context, particular emphasis is given to the "scientific" (*kexue*) character of the concept, signifying the objective qualification of the party-state to formulate and implement this progressive concept. The scientific qualifications of the party-state are reflected specifically in the so-called "five overall plans" (*wu ge tongchou*) attached to the new concept: according to the party documents, implementing the "scientific development concept of comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development"

> "[…] means that we must make overall planning for urban and rural development, for regional development, for economic and social development, for the harmonious development of man and nature, and for domestic development and opening the country to the outside world."[28]

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[26] RMRB website, July 4, 2005, English translation cited from BBC Monitoring Global Newsline Asia Pacific Political File, July 9, 2005.

[27] RMRB, January 12, February 22, March 22, 2004. An earlier version of the concept without the attribute "scientific" had been introduced in fall 2003; RMRB, October 1, November 30, 2003. The concept, which was discussed in more detail at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16. Central Committee of the CCP in October 2005, will also be adopted into the 11th five-year program of social and economic development (2006-2010); cf. Holbig (2005b).

[28] RMRB, March 22, 2004.

In the light of a dominant perception of growing income disparities and social inequalities in China, the "overall planning" envisaged here seems to legitimize social expectations that the party will not let this trend go unheeded, but actively arrange for compensation mechanisms between urban dwellers and peasants, between East and West China, between the socio-economically privileged and the underprivileged, at least in the longer run. This is a clear departure, at least at the ideological level, from the elitist orientation of the previous leadership under Jiang Zemin which held that "to gradually achieve common welfare, one should widen the income gap in a rational manner, but prevent [social] polarization" (*heli lakai shouru chaju, you fangzhi liangji fenhua, zhubu shixian tongtong fuyu*).[29] At the same time, social expectations of compensation between social groups encouraged under Hu Jintao support the legitimation of the party-state as the only authority capable of commanding a "fair" re-distribution of resources and of guaranteeing effective institutional mechanisms for compensation. In this way, the "scientific development concept" not only claims to present an innovative embodiment of the new leaders' populist outlook, but also projects a specific re-distributive role of the party-state in pursuing social equality and "common interest" which, in turn, supports the normative justification of its leading position in the country's modernization process.

With the concept of a "harmonious socialist society" (*shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*) the party leadership introduced another formula which takes up and refines the party's management of social expectations implicit in the "scientific development concept". The concept of a "harmonious society" was first mentioned in the resolution of the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 and defined at the fourth plenary session in September 2004 as a society built on "democracy and rule of law, justice and equality, trust and truthfulness, amity and vitality, order and stability, and a harmonious relation with nature". With respect to social relations, the new vision was described as a society "in which all the people will do their best, each individual has his proper place, and everybody will get along in harmony with each other".[30] In February 2005, Hu Jintao, in a long speech that was published only four months later (obviously in the context of a new climax of social protests in rural and urban areas), expounded on the concept in person. The concept's relevance to the legitimacy of CCP rule was made very clear in Hu's speech when he stated that the creation of a "harmonious socialist society" was "essential for consolidating the party's social foundation to govern and achieve the party's historical governing mission".[31]

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[29] Lu Hao 2000: 37.

[30] Xinhua, September 25, 2005.

[31] RMRB, June 27, 2005.; English translation cited from BBC Monitoring Global Newsline Asia Pacific Political File, July 2, 2005.

While this concept, at first glance, seems to be just another manifestation of the new leadership's populist outlook, it carries at least two innovative aspects. First, the notion of a "harmonious socialist society" starts from the acknowledgement of serious social contradictions that have arisen in the process of transition. Besides the well-known problems of economic imbalances, energy and infrastructure bottlenecks, Hu Jintao named among the most pressing social problems "people's growing and increasingly diverse material and cultural needs", "the increasingly complex interests in different social sectors", and "the greater fluidity of personnel flows, social organization and management". Also, he admitted "the appearance of all sorts of thoughts and cultures", the fact that "people's mental activities have become noticeably more independent, selective, changeable, and different" as well as "people's heightening awareness of democracy and the law and growing enthusiasm for political participation".[32] Quite different from former party rhetoric which emphasized the fundamental need of maintaining social stability through rigid instruments of party-state control, we find here an explicit recognition of social complexity, of diverging social interests and of pluralist tendencies translating into demands for political participation. The discourse of a "harmonious society", of course, should not be misread as a signal to launch democratic reforms. Rather, it appears as a strategic attempt of the new leadership to rationally resolve the root causes of growing social contradictions which are increasingly perceived as a risk to social stability and to the political legitimacy of CCP rule (cf. Tomba 2005).

Second, and corresponding to these acknowledgements, the concept of a "harmonious society" as expounded by Hu Jintao presents a new form of management of social expectations. By projecting the ideal of a society "in which all the people will do their best and each individual has his proper place," the party gives rise to social expectations that it will not only satisfy people's basic material needs, but create conditions that allow everyone a fair chance to develop his or her individual abilities to the full and thus to contribute to the "creative vitality of society as a whole" (*shehui de chuangzao huoli*) (RMRB, June 27, 2005). At the rhetorical level, this vision goes far beyond the "paternalist" mode of legitimation in many former Soviet-type societies, where people were provided basic existential guarantees in exchange for social immobilism and political loyalty (Fehér 1982, see above). Rather, it seems to approach more "liberal" governance styles in modern industrial states which guarantee their citizens equal opportunities while assigning to them the responsibility of taking the risks of individual choice. In this idealized vision, the legitimacy of one-party rule is validated in terms of social expectations of equal participation in national welfare, of individual entitlements vis-à-vis the party-state and of a more symmetric contribution of rights and responsibilities between the individual and the state.

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[32] Ibid.

Realistically, of course, one has to bear in mind that this new form of "liberal" governance, for the time being, does not apply to the whole populace but only to the educated and affluent urban elites which, in fact, appear as the main protagonists in the vision of a "harmonious society". At least in the eyes of these new social elites, the concept assigns to the party a central role in the dynamic process of economic development, social engineering and nation building. This seemingly "liberal" approach, however, converges in a peculiar way with traditional "Confucian" modes of governance: On the one hand, urban elites are "reponsibilized" to develop their individual potentials to the full and thus to contribute to the nation's material development. On the other hand, they are expected to subscribe to traditional schemes of social self-governance based on Confucian ethics of individual self-discipline and thus to contribute to building a "spiritual civilization".[33] Here again, the CCP seeks to justify its "historical governing mission" and ruling position by reference to a unique blend of modern liberal and of traditional norms of social governance. While ideological innovation is regarded as a necessary concomitant of rapid social transition, it remains anchored to the orthodox set of Confucian-Communist legitimacy doctrines, thus following a narrow path of ideological change.

6. Conclusion

As a Socialist country undergoing rapid social and economic transition, China presents a revealing case study on the role of ideology in the process of institutional change. The career of the "Three Representations" and surrounding concepts in recent official discourse highlights the complex relationship between ideological reform and political legitimacy.

The "Three Representations" have been formulated since spring 2000 under former CCP general-secretary Jiang Zemin to ideologically reconstruct the CCP's legitimacy. A core element in this reconstruction was to legitimize the continuation of the party's historical ruling mission by framing the authority of Communist rule in the light of dynamic innovation and adaptation to a changing reality. According to Jiang Zemin's agenda, the "Three Representations" implied an elitist redefinition of the "common interest" represented by the CCP. The

[33] The author wants to thank Luigi Tomba for pointing out the traditional values inherent in the "harmonious society" concept. As Tomba has shown, Chinese urban communities (*shequ*) have been regarded in recent years as testing grounds for creating a "harmonious society" where quasi-autonomous social players – members of the educated and affluent middle class – are co-opted by the party as "virtuous citizens" to reinforce its ruling capacity and consolidate its regime legitimacy. The revitalization of Confucian values, norms and responsibilities plays a crucial role in this new discourse of social governance; cf. Tomba (2005) and Tomba (forthcoming); see also Sigley (2004).

redefinition was designed to provide ideological justification for a potentially far-reaching institutional reform: the co-optation of new social elites into the party and the expansion of the CCP's ruling constituency. It was this elitist strategy, however, which provoked strong resistance inside and outside the party due to the renouncement of traditional Communist ideals. Perceiving an imminent danger of withdrawal of popular consent and a looming crisis of political legitimacy, the new party leadership under Hu Jintao since late 2002 presented a populist re-interpretation of the "Three Representations". This new populist outlook served both to re-justify party rule in terms of orthodox ideological norms (Marxist tenets of the CCP as vanguard of the working class combined with traditional Chinese legitimacy doctrines) and to remobilize the consent and political loyalty, if not of the whole populace, at least among the rank and file of party cadres. Also, with more recent inventions in official discourse such as a "harmonious socialist society", the party tries to manage social expectations in a way that is conducive to a dynamic reconstruction of CCP legitimacy by portraying it as an ever-innovative organization capable of learning and adapting to an ever-changing economic, social and political environment. The new blend of traditional Confucian-Communist legitimacy doctrines and more "liberal" norms of social governance introduced in this context at the same time confirms very clearly the path-dependent character of ideological change which, in turn, circumscribes a narrow corridor for institutional change.

As the examples of the "Three Representations" and surrounding concepts demonstrate, ideology still plays a crucial role in sustaining the political legitimacy of the CCP and supporting the "resilience" of authoritarian rule.[34] This is true irrespective of, or rather, despite the regime's economic success and the fact that the majority of people are better off now than in the past. Although the material well being of most Chinese can be expected to smooth the transition process and function as a kind of legitimacy buffer, the vulnerability of the Chinese party-state remains high due to the prominent role ideology holds. Any reforms attempting to reformulate core tenets of the dominant ideology and going beyond the Communist grand tradition run the danger of provoking a massive withdrawal of popular consent and a breakdown of political legitimacy. The remaining room for innovation in this path-dependent process of ideological change, while necessary to sustain regime legitimacy, holds a delegitimizing potential in the longer run: On the one hand, as illustrated by the recent discourse of a "harmonious socialist society", the legitimacy of one-party rule is linked in a positive way to social expectations of equal participation in national welfare and of individual entitlements vis-à-vis the party-state. On the other hand, party rule may be confronted with a growing legitimacy deficit if government performance fails to fulfill these

[34] For the illuminating debate about "authoritarian resilience" in China cf. Nathan (2003), Dickson (2003), Gilley (2003), Pei (2003) and Wang (2003).

expectations or if social expectations develop a dynamics of their own which challenges well-established social constructions of national versus individual identities. The dominant ideology thus poses to the Chinese party-state a legitimation dilemma that will be hard to resolve within the framework of authoritarian one-party rule. The new party leadership under Hu Jintao, at least, seems to have learned this lesson: If increased economic prosperity, other things being equal, leads to more political stability, other things are rarely equal.

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