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The Regime Durability of Communist Power in China: Three Approaches to Examine the Chinese Communist Party

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Abstract: This essay examines the durability of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from an interdisciplinary perspective. By conducting investigations into the CCP's evolution, this essay offers three crucial approaches to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the durability of the Communist regime in China. It argues that the fast-growing economy since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978 has decisively improved the living standards of the Chinese people, forming the core of the CCP's legitimacy. However, relying solely on the economic approach is not sufficient to fully assess the durability of the CCP. The second approach suggested by this paper involves a more democratized approach to speech control and loosened censorship, allowing a certain degree of plurality of opinions while still prohibiting subversive speeches. The third approach involves the sanctification of the CCP among the people, wherein the concept of "the CCP is always for the people" is constructed and imbued. These three mutually constitutive, conjunctive, and integrated approaches consistently reinforce the Party's durability.

Keywords: Regime durability; Chinese Communist Party; economy; surveillance; sanctification.

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1. Introduction

A series of collapses of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, which stimulated a wave of rapid and substantial democratization described by Bruszt & Stark (1991), "10 years in Poland, 10 months in Hungary, 10 weeks in the GDR, 10 days in Czechoslovakia… 10 hours in Romania" [1], and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, which marked the end of the Cold War, were imperative and remarkable in history in terms of confirming the success of the U.S.-led democracy, which Francis Fukuyama described as "the end of history" [2]. By that time, so many Chinese watchers were expecting China, the second largest country led by the Communist regime, to conduct either radical or gradual and relatively small-scale democratization following what was considered an inexorable and inevitable trend around the world [3-5]. Even after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, some scholars still believed that China would be on the way to the U.S. model of democratization. For example, Yu (1994) still suggested that democratization and pluralism must be established and further enhanced in China because of the impossibility of the coexistence of a more open economic system and political repression [6].

However, time has proven that these predictions are wrong. China today is still under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is widely considered an authoritarian state. China is not inclined to conduct a U.S. model of democratization, as scholars in the last century have expected. Therefore, there is a long-standing and debated question regarding the durability of the CCP—what explains the regime durability of communist power in China? Some New Leftist scholars, for example, Wang (2014), refute Fukuyama's idea and argue that China's model is "representational democracy", which differs from the representative democracy of Western countries, and that the Chinese people are satisfied with the CCP's leadership since their desires are fulfilled, so that this kind of democracy is argued by Wang as an alternative and challenge to the U.S.-led democracy [7]. However, Wang's argument is only a "practical democracy", which is not a theoretical

democratic system and could be said as merely a coincidence that the leaders have performed well—as Chen & Naughton (2016) argue, there is no single "China model", which means China's remarkable economic achievements are based on different strategies in different periods by the dedicated reform leaders [8]. Although the previous leaders of the CCP have left many in-party traditions that prevent the occurrence of a despotic dictatorship, the system itself cannot guarantee long-lasting success by the party and prevent the presence of a tradition breaker—that is, Xi Jinping. Other scholars approach this question from an organizational perspective. For example, Landry (2008) argues that compared with the USSR, a well-constructed internal system of the CCP's local cadres' appointments is the key to economic decentralization, which is vital for economic development, the core for the regime's ability to fulfill public demands [9].

Indeed, the fulfillment of people's desires is essential to the durability of the party, but it is not enough to comprehensively examine the current existence of the CCP, which is complicated and requires interdisciplinary research. This essay suggests three approaches to understanding the party's durability. The first approach is the fast-growing economy after the Reform and Opening-up, which has predominantly and decisively improved the living standards of the Chinese people. The second approach is more democratized speech control and loosened censorship, which to a certain degree allows the plurality of opinions but still prohibits subversive speeches. The third approach is the sanctification of the CCP among the people, in which the concept of "the CCP is always for the people" is constructed and imbued. These three approaches are mutually constitutive, conjunctive, and integrated. Hence, the party's durability can be examined more comprehensively through multiple approaches.

2. The Fast-Growing Economy and Deideologization

2.1. China's Economic Achievements

After the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, in 1978, China's economy profoundly transformed from a planned economy in the collective era to a market economy. The subsequent economic growth was astonishing, with an average GDP growth of 9.5% per year from 1978 to 2005 [10], and has remained relatively high in recent decades, at approximately 7.8% from 2009 to 2019 [11].

Although some scholars and even some high-ranking government officials are skeptical about the figures due to the unreliability of the national GDP figures [12], people's living standards have significantly improved. First, the impoverished population has declined dramatically. The figure shows that the percentage of villages in poverty declined rapidly, from 40.65% in 1980 to 10.55% in 1990 and 4.75% in 2001 [13]. Moreover, Xi Jinping recently declared that China has eradicated extreme poverty, and such an achievement is a "miracle" [14]. Therefore, it could be said that China's success in poverty reduction is splendid for the regime in terms of increasing the reliability and credibility of its political system. As Yong & Chen (2022) argue, the nature of the socialist system is the key to having the capacity to conduct such a "miracle" [15]. The causal relationship between the state apparatus and the eradication of poverty is still controversial; the people nonetheless tend to have confidence in China's socialist system due to the empirical facts, which strengthens the stability of the CCP.

In addition to increasing the population out of impoverishment across the whole country, the large amount of investment in infrastructure building and urbanization is also conducive to regime stability. For example, as one of the most important infrastructures for the development of the country, the investment in transportation infrastructure grew from 8.02 billion yuan in 1978 to 609.11 billion yuan in 2008, and there was a surge in the transport system mileage, where the highways grew from 99.65 thousand km in 1950 to 3457.21 thousand km in 2008, the railways from 22.2 thousand km to 103.16 thousand km in 2008, the waterways from 73.64 thousand km to 158.45 thousand km in 2008,

and the civil aviation from 8.22 thousand km to 2714.09 thousand km in 2008 [16]. Moreover, urbanization in China also marked a great achievement, with the proportion of the population living in urban areas increasing rapidly from approximately 20% in 1978 to approximately 56% in 2015, which exceeded the boundary of the agricultural country and urban country in 2010; that means that China is currently considered an urban country [17]. Although some scholars such as Ansar et al. (2016) argue that poor management of infrastructure investments causes severe economic and financial problems in China, in general, the development of infrastructure and urbanization greatly contribute to economic growth and the fulfillment of public wants and needs [18].

2.2. Transformed Ideology – "Development Has Absolute Priority"

This astounding economic development was based on the transformed ideology of the reform era. During the collective era, Mao's ideology was "take class struggle as the key link", which highlighted the social class in society and emphasized that the class struggle was the most fundamental and important thing for China [19]. After Deng Xiaoping became the de facto supreme leader, he revised Mao's class struggle route and emphasized that development had absolute priority, which shifted the national direction to economic development [20]. This deideologization of class consciousness is a crucial part of the theory of economic development. The word "class" in China was gradually removed from official discourses and changed to "social strata" during the reform era. As Anagnost (2008) convincingly argues, this shift has created a new model of citizenship that is much more commodified and suitable for neoliberalism [21].

Indeed, deideologization from Maoism is the decisive theoretical basis for economic development in terms of removing ideological barriers. Deng's concept of "development has absolute priority" across the whole country was instilled. Moreover, the cadres were also impacted by this concept due to the transformed criterion of evaluation, which means that the economic achievements performed by the cadres are essential for promotion. Cai (2011) suggested a dual model of analyzing the promotion of CCP cadres, which is the political achievement the cadres have conducted and the political faction to which they belong [22]. Although political faction is a highly controversial topic, there is a consensus that political achievement, which clearly involves economic development, is highly valued for promotion. According to Landry (2008), the selection of good local cadres based on the economic calculus explains the economic achievements in China [23].

It could be said that the salient economic growth based on Deng's developmental theory is the kernel of the successful fulfillment of people's desires. Such an overhaul of China's national economic structure and ideology leads to long-lasting high economic growth, which fundamentally consolidates the performative legitimacy of the CCP.

3. Diversity of Voice and its Red Line

3.1. Anti-Models of Surveillance

The liberalization of the economy in China did not bring about political democratization [24], but this does not mean that China is still "authoritarian" as it is in the Mao era because, as Brady (2010) claims, pervasive and extremely coercive censorship, such as that of North Korea and Cuba, is an anti-model for China since it is not suitable for China's international trade based on the modern economy [25]. Therefore, China has sought a point of equilibrium that allows a certain degree of democratization to fit its modern economy while simultaneously preventing subversive speeches. This is a crucial approach to understanding regime durability.

As discussed in the previous section, China, during the reform era, deideologized Maoism to achieve economic development. However, the deideologization went much further than that, which significantly changed Chinese people's mindsets and led to ideological Westernization in the 1980s. The people started to embrace Western values, publicly debated topics that were considered counterrevolutionary during the Mao era [26],

and asked the government to conduct democratization. Eventually, it led to massive protests, and the most influential protest was the 1989 Tiananmen incident. Although Bergere (1992) concluded that the Tiananmen incident was not overall asking for political change [27], there was no doubt that the leading figures of this protest were asking for it, and the party leaders perceived the quality of this protest as a "political-change-asking" one. Immediately after the protest, Deng said, "The developments are good in this decade, but the biggest mistake is the education, that the political thought work was not emphasized, the development of education is lacking" [28]. Deng also emphasized his both-hands theory, "grasping both hands tightly", in which one hand was reform and opening up, and the other hand included political thought [29]. It could be said that the Tiananmen incident was a failure for the regime to peacefully maintain its stability and a trigger for the regime to realize the necessity of repressing subversive speeches.

In addition to the domestic anti-model, which was the brutal military repression in 1989, a foreign anti-model for the CCP was the reform initiated by Gorbachev in the USSR. As Brady (2010) argued, Gorbachev realized that it was impossible to regain censorship after lifting it through his political reform, and then the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) failed to control its bureaucracy and the people [30]. Consequently, the people in the USSR started to criticize the CPSU publicly, and some local newspapers, including the official newspaper of the CPSU – Pravda – became inimical to the CPSU by publishing antiparty articles [31,32]. The Soviet cadres, including Gorbachev himself, used political jokes to criticize the CPSU [33]. The situation depicted by Yegor Gaidar was that in late 1991, Russia could be considered the most liberal society in the world [34]. Thus, in addition to the banal and "orthodox" theories that brought about the economic collapse of the USSR, fully lifted censorship also made a fatal contribution to the disintegration of the USSR, which, as Brady argues, is a prototypical anti-model for the CCP.

3.2 Anti-Model Lessons: An Equilibrium Point – Balancing Economic Development and Social Stability

Both the domestic and foreign experiences discussed above are anti-models for the CCP, and the red line should be set up to avoid subversive movements. The red line is created through censorship and surveillance, which restricts subversive and adversarial speeches or movements that may instigate people to defy the party's leadership. Thus, after the Tiananmen incident, Jiang Zemin, the newly selected supreme leader of the CCP, said, "We should not let the mistakes disturb the overall situation of our party and country. When we are facing problems related to the political direction and political principles, we should clearly show our position and intervene" during the meeting with those cadres in charge of propaganda and thought work [35]. Hu Jintao, the successor of Jiang, also pointed out that "'mind the overall situation' means strictly following and implementing the decisions and deployments made by the party central committee. Always take economic development as the key and follow the correct instructions (from the party central committee) during the meeting of national propaganda and thought work [36]. Moreover, Xi Jinping, during the same routine meeting in 2013, emphasized that "propaganda and thought work must be maintained a high degree of consistency with the party central committee in order to maintain the authority of the central committee… when facing the problems related to fundamental political principle… we must fight proactively… with a clear mind" [37]. As Brady (2009) asserts, after the Tiananmen incident, the CCP concluded that propaganda and thought work were in fact the "lifeline" of the party; they learned and conducted "the most undemocratic practices of modern Western societies" to avoid real democratization [38]. Hence, what the CCP realized from past domestic and foreign "blunders" about censorship is the repeatedly emphasized "overall situation" and "problems related to political principle" by the three top leaders, which the party would intervene in if the subversive speeches touched upon and crossed the red lines.

To achieve a fast-growing modernized economy and maintain one-party leadership spontaneously, the CCP found an equilibrium point that partially loosens censorship and surveillance controls and allows democratization to a certain degree, but with a "political principle"-related boundary, which is the red line set up by the party to avoid subversive speeches to the regime. Yu (1994) used an analogy to describe the situation in China, in which published works and news reports in China indicated that people can swim in economic ponds but are bound in "political jars" [39]. By scrutinizing the experiences of manifold anti-models, the CCP has successfully controlled the potential diversity of voices in China at a perfect equilibrium point, at which economic growth needs can be satisfied by the limited lifting of strict and ubiquitous surveillance, and domestic turbulence can be prevented by setting up a red line. This is why, currently, in China, the government does not punish most of the criticisms of the government because the contents are not considered subversive [40], but occasionally, some influential figures, such as Bi Fujian or Li Wenliang, were punished since they crossed the red lines.

4. Construction of Sanctity and Charisma

4.1. Mao's Legacies and Their Implications

In addition to governing the people through the fulfillment of public demands and maintaining social stability by avoiding potential subversions, the sanctification of the CCP also significantly contributes to the durability of the regime in terms of constructing loyalty to the party among the people. The CCP utilizes its revolutionary history to constantly educate the people who the CCP has saved China from over one hundred years of national humiliation and instils the concept that the CCP is all for the people.

The revolutionary history of the CCP originated in the civil war era of the 1920s. The CCP fought against the so-called "reactionary (*Fan Dong Pai*)" Guomindang regime and the Japanese imperial forces, who conducted brutal massacres in China during World War II. However, the implication of the communist revolution in China is far beyond that, which can be tied to Qing China since Mao, after 1949, abolished all unequal treaties signed by the Qing court with other powers [41]. Mao's diplomatic policy of "cleaning the house first and then inviting guests (*Da Sao Gan Jing Wu Zi Zai Qing Ke*)" decisively removed long-lasting national humiliation and diffidence for the Chinese people. Moreover, as Meisner (1999) argues, the Mao era is the turning point for China in terms of transforming into an industrial nation by achieving high rates of growth in industrialization. After 1978, the reformers conducted reforms based on these industrial foundations built in the Mao era, which were essential to the success of the reform [42]. This is why the CCP did not denounce Mao as Khrushchev did to Stalin.

The other legacy of Mao that has a significant influence on all successors of the CCP is his mass line policy. The mass line means that CCP members should be "from the masses and go to the masses", and the mistake that all CCP members should avoid is "alienation from the masses" [43]. The Mass Line is one of the most fundamental and imperative ways of obtaining people's support, and it is perceived as leading to the victory of the CCP in civil wars [44]. The mass line was practiced during the war era and was inherited and applied by the CCP after 1949. Frenkiel & Shpakovskaya (2019) indicate that the mass line has become the basic policy of the party and is strictly followed and practiced by all successor party leaders [45]. For instance, Jiang Zemin's "three represents" theory suggests that the CCP has transformed to include all the Chinese people instead of being purely a proletarian party, which means that the CCP's inclusiveness has been expanded to include more of the "masses" [46].

Mao's legacies—revolutionary history, industrial foundations, and mass line policy—are crucial to the sanctity of the CCP. The CCP leaves a positive evaluation of Mao, relies on his legacies, and constantly educates the people about the CCP's legitimacy and greatness through these aspects, in which the revolutionary history reflects the party's

glorified past, industrial foundations have laid a foundation for the later reform that benefits the Chinese people, and the mass line shows that the party always represents the people and is always for the people. Thus, the robust sanctity of the CCP has been constructed and consolidated through the heritages of Mao and the party's rhetoric.

4.2. Fusion with Traditional Chinese Values

Another intriguing approach to the sanctity of the party is the formation of a charismatic image of CCP leaders. As Kwon & Chung (2012) argue, North Korea successfully transferred filial piety into a principle of political loyalty so that the charisma of Kim Il-Sung and his hereditary successors were consolidated [47]. This is also true in the case of China, where the Chinese people have been impacted by Confucianism for thousands of years. Even though the CCP tried multiple times to eradicate Confucian ideas, such as Mao during the Cultural Revolution, which launched an anti-Confucianism campaign [48], the embedded cultural ideas cannot be removed. The party leaders then utilize Confucianism to sanctify themselves and the party by fusing themselves into Confucian ideas.

Confucian ideas suggest that the five most fundamental and unchallengeable figures to which all people should show absolute respect are *Tian* (heaven), *Di* (Earth), *Jun* (monarch), *Qin* (parents), and *Shi* (teachers). During the Cultural Revolution, Mao was given the title known by the "Four Greats" – "Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander, Great Helmsman". All the cadres and people continued to repeat the "Four Greats" to show their loyalty to Mao. Although Mao was not comfortable with the prevalence of the "Four Greats" produced by the propaganda machinery and ordered it to change, he remained one "Great" after all—the "Great Teacher" [49].

The successors of the CCP learned from Mao's model of fusion and constructed similar relations to reinforce their charisma. Another important value of Confucianism is filial piety. As Hamilton et al. (1989) mention, governmental officials in China are called "parental officials (*FuMu Guan*)", which significantly indicates the image of what a government official ought to be in people's minds [50]. Xi is a classic example in which he launched massive propaganda campaigns to construct a paternalistic relationship by giving him the title *Xi Dada* (Uncle Xi) and his wife, Peng Liyuan, the title *Peng Mama* (Mother Peng). The song "Xi Dada loves Peng Mama" has recently prevailed and further enhanced his charisma [51].

The fusion with Confucianism provides an anthropological edge to understanding the regime's sanctity and the leaders' charisma, which are crucial to the durability of the CCP. This construction of Confucian relationships generates political loyalty through the politicization of Confucian docility and always consolidates charismatic legitimacy among people psychologically based on the Chinese tradition.

5. Conclusion

The debate around the durability of CCPs is controversial. To examine this topic critically and comprehensively, interdisciplinary studies from multiple perspectives are needed. This essay has discussed three approaches to examine regime stability—astonishing economic achievements based on the transformed ideology of "development has absolute priority", which successfully fulfills public desires and is the most important and fundamental for regime durability; loosened surveillance and censorship provide a diverse voice, which is a suitable environment for modern economic development but also includes a certain level of control to prevent latent subversion; sanctification of the CCP through ideological education based on the utilization of Mao's legacy and the construction of Confucian relationships; and the creation and constant enhancement of a scared image of the CCP and party leaders. These three approaches are mutually constitutive, which means that a good achievement in a certain approach can contribute to the other two. Hence, the CCP has successfully built its rational-legal authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority and has constantly bolstered them through practices of

these three approaches, which explains why the CCP has gained support among the Chinese people. Thus, the durability of the CCP can be examined and explained from a comprehensive view, which is an integration of previous single-perspective studies.

However, this study has limitations. As Chen & Naughton (2016) demonstrated, China is dynamic [52]. This essay is an induction based on empirical evidence and has temporal limits, which means that it can only determine the durability of the CCP up to the current era. Xi Jinping, the current leader of the CCP, has greatly changed China's political direction. His "retrogressions", including but not confined to the fixed constitution, his third term, the abolishment of the party traditions in the politburo, the much more coercive and omnipresent surveillance, and the notorious "zero-covid" policy, may challenge this model because the stagnation of the recent economy and strengthened coercion have instigated massive grievances, sarcastic views on the CCP, and even intensive public protests in China, which are likely to destabilize the regime. Moreover, his destruction of the party's tradition may exacerbate factional struggles inside the party, which is also harmful to the CCP since the selection of cadres is no longer based on Cai's dual model but rather based on a new single model—congalty to him. Therefore, the approaches of this essay can only be used to examine the durability of the CCP today, but it may not be feasible to examine it in the future.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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