This essay seeks to explain how the People’s Republic of China, an authoritarian state, creates and maintains political legitimacy. Following David Beetham, a state must fulfill, or appear to fulfill, three criteria to possess political legitimacy: (1) conformity to established rules, (2) justifiability of the rules by reference to shared beliefs, and (3) the expressed consent of the people. Despite changing societal beliefs, the CCP has retained its legitimacy because it consistently fulfilled each of these criteria through changes to the regime: the CCP redefined the national interest as the pursuit of economic performance; it launched a public crusade against corruption; and it made heavy use of propaganda to both mobilize active support and discredit reports of dissidence. However, due to its basis in economic performance, the CCP’s legitimacy will reach a crisis if China faces a recession.

Western news is rife with reports of the discontent of Chinese citizens. Headlines detailing China’s corruption, human rights abuses, and repression of free speech are seen frequently on international front pages. If measured by accounts of western media alone, one may conclude that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—and, as a result, the Chinese government—seriously lacks political legitimacy. However, China came in 13th in Bruce Gilley’s 2006 legitimacy

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index (which measured the legitimacy of 72 regimes), beating the UK, Australia and 15 other western liberal democracies. More surprising, this measure comes just 17 years after the Tiananmen Square protests brought the Chinese government to the brink of destabilization. I argue that China owes this newfound legitimacy to its constant and persistent efforts to maintain a legitimacy that is culturally, politically, and economically relevant to its population, even when doing so means abandoning much of the founding ideology of the CCP.

**The Concept of Legitimacy**

Any analysis of a regime’s maintenance of legitimacy must first begin with a discussion of the concept as a whole—of what legitimacy is, and why it is important to maintain. In *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber defines a state as the entity that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force over a given territory and its populous. Moreover, he notes that “if the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers

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1 Gilley’s index ranked states on the basis of three principle variables found to have a causal relationship with legitimacy, which correspond with three broad categories: good governance, democratic rights, and welfare gains. Indicators used were based on Beetham’s three criteria for legitimacy: (1) views of legality: the state’s respect for individual human rights, confidence in the police, and confidence in the civil service; (2) views of justification: satisfaction with democratic development, evaluation of the current political system, satisfaction with operation of democracy, use of violence in civil protest; and (3) acts of consent: voter turnout, and quasi-voluntary taxes. China received a score of 6.58 out of 10. The highest scoring state was Denmark, at 7.62. The US scored 6.82, while the UK scored only 6.28. Japan received a 5.62, and South Korea got a 5.45; Bruce Giley, “The Determinants for State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries,” *International Political Science Review*, 27(1) (2006), 47-71. Other China scholars, such as Anne-Marie Brady, also acknowledge that, overall, the existing political system is accepted by the vast majority of Chinese citizens—even if many disapprove of certain aspects of the regime; Anne-Marie Brady, “Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China’s Popular Authoritarianism,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(3) (2009), 436.
that be.” To create obedience and retain a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, the state has two options. The first option is to build political legitimacy, defined by Seymour Martin Lipset as “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society.” To this definition C. J. Friedrich adds: “legitimacy is a very particular form of consensus which revolves around the question of the right or title to rule.” Legitimacy is a trait that encourages people to comply with the rules of society because they believe they should, even when the state cannot punish noncompliance. The alternative option is to force the compliance of the people through the use of fear, violence, and repression.


3 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1959), 64. Lipset’s analysis of political legitimacy is based on democratic systems. However, his analysis is equally appropriate for any type of regime, whether it is a liberal democracy, an authoritarian dictatorship, or any hybrid formulation in between. Democracy is not a necessary condition for the creation of legitimacy, nor does it absolutely correlate with the level of legitimacy that a regime will possess; Bo Rothstein, “Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(3) (2009), 311-330. Highly authoritarian states can possess extensive legitimacy, just as democratic states can easily suffer from a complete lack of it. Singapore, one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world possesses solid legitimacy and has for the past 50 years. The regime rarely experiences violent acts of dissidence and is highly popular among the population; C. George, “Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore,” *The Pacific Review* 20, (2007), 127-145. In contrast, Rothstein argues, in *Creating Political Legitimacy*, that the Yugoslavian civil war of the early 1990’s was caused largely by the political decisions of freely and fairly elected democratic leaders. Because civil war is the clearest available indication of the breakdown of political legitimacy, it logically follows that legitimacy is more about how governing power is exercised than the institutional means by which that power is distributed; Rothstein, 311-330.

The absolute reliance on fear, violence, and repression to maintain power, however, is only effective in the short term. Ultimately, violence is just as damaging to its perpetrators as it is to the population it is used to control.\footnote{Hannah Arendt, \textit{On Violence} (United States: Harvest Books, 1970), 53.} Excessive violence destroys what legitimacy is left and leads to revolts and civil war, undermining the very monopoly that such violence is intended to uphold.\footnote{George, 127-145.} Rousseau noted in 1762, “the stronger is never strong enough to be forever master unless he transforms his force into right and obedience into duty.”\footnote{Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings}, \textit{in:} V. Gourevitch ed: \textit{Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Vol. 2}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, [1762] 1997), Bk. 1.3.} Without such a transformation, the excessive violence that is necessary to maintain power will destroy the system from within. Thus, for states to maintain long-term control over the legitimate use of force, they must construct political legitimacy.

Weber defines legitimacy as “the belief in legitimacy,” and states that the only thing needed for a regime to be legitimate is for people to believe that it is.\footnote{Max Weber, (1968) \textit{Economy and Society}, Ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich Eds. (London: University of California Press, 1968) 23, 157, 659.} This definition, however, omits important aspects of the composition of legitimacy, and makes it difficult to study exactly why a regime is or is not legitimate. In \textit{The Legitimation of Power}, David Beetham provides an alternative definition of legitimacy; one that enables social scientists to dissect its components and study both its creation and its dissolution. Beetham’s definition is a checklist of three criteria a state must fulfill, or appear to fulfill, to possess political legitimacy. These criteria are: (1) conformity to established rules, (2) justifiability of the rules by reference to shared beliefs, and (3) the expressed consent of the people. Importantly, Beetham notes that legitimacy is not an all or nothing concept, but rather a measurement of degree, corresponding to the extent each
criterion is fulfilled. Together, these criteria provide the moral grounds for the populous’ obligation to support and cooperate with power holders.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{Legitimacy and the CPP}

The first criterion, conformity to rules, means that a regime must acquire and exercise its power in accordance with established rules, both formal and informal. Legitimacy stems from the Latin word \textit{Legitimus}, meaning lawful, and thus law and rules are essential to both the institution and maintenance of power. More than any other criteria, a lack of conformity to the rules is toxic to a regime’s stability and can lead to a state of illegitimacy that will destabilize a regime, regardless of how fully the other two criteria are met.\textsuperscript{10}

Conformity to the rules as a requirement for legitimate government has an important place in historical China. Until the 1900s, China’s dynastic government was highly centralized with no formal limits on the leader’s powers. Rather, governments were constrained by a Confucian belief, called \textit{The Mandate of Heaven}, that unless a ruler behaved by strict moral and ethical standards they would lose their divine right to rule and could be legally overthrown by the people. All officials were intellectual elites who spent decades studying the Confucian teachings on good governance and morality, leading to both a highly developed ethic of rule and an expectation on the behalf of the public that their officials would hold themselves to the highest


Although China has long since abandoned traditional dynastic rule, a solid belief that leaders should hold themselves to superior standards of ethical behavior continues to underpin Chinese Society. In recent years, this belief has played a major role in both the destruction of the legitimacy of CCP, as well as in its rebirth.

In 1989, student protests swept Beijing into a fury of opposition towards the government, culminating in the June 4 Tiananmen Square massacre. Though the protestors were unhappy with many aspects of the CCP’s rule, one of their major complaints centered on the rampant corruption that perforated the regime during the 1980s. The violent repression of the protestors on June 4 created a crisis of legitimacy for the Chinese government. Once martial law halted active dissonance, the government rushed to reclaim legitimacy before the costs of maintaining power by force became overwhelming.

One way in which the Chinese government sought to regain legitimacy was to return to the Confucian emphasis on good governance. Top Chinese officials began making frequent speeches condemning corruption and actively linking anti-corruption measures to state legitimacy. It introduced the Confucian slogan Rule of Virtue (De Zhi) into state propaganda and instituted numerous regulations and bureaucratic censorship mechanisms (about 1,200 laws, rules, and directives in total). The regime increased the number of corruption prosecutions to about 150,000 convictions each year, with the most egregious offenders receiving the death penalty. These trials were and

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14 Barboza, B1.
continue to be highly publicized, all as part of the government’s “war on corruption.”\textsuperscript{15} All of these changes are part of an extensive and ongoing campaign to convince the populous that the regime is truly making efforts to conform to the rules.

Government’s conformity to the rules, however, has no effect if the population does not believe those rules are legitimate to begin with. Thus, a normative justification of the rules in terms of shared beliefs (the second criterion), forms the heart of a regime’s legitimacy. This criterion has two aspects: a base justification of the leaders’ authority to rule, and a definition of good exercise of power. For a ruler and his actions to be considered legitimate, he must first claim that his dominance is derived from what the population believes is a valid source of authority (god-given, hereditary tradition, democratic constitutionalism, popularity, performance, etc.). When the basis that the ruler uses as a justification for his/her authority does not match with the populations’ beliefs, the population will withdraw its consent to be ruled.

The CCP has historically justified its rule on the basis of performance, either ideological performance framed through a popular belief in communism, or on moral and economic performance as it does now.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike authority derived from a higher order, the CCP ties its right to rule directly to its ability to promote what the public sees as the common interest. This foundation of authority is much shakier than authority derived from divine or hereditary roots. With authority based on performance, the regime must be able to show continuous evidence that its policies are in fact making progress towards the popularly defined common interest. A legitimacy deficit emerges if beliefs or circumstances defining the common interest change, depriving the rules of their basis of support, or rendering existing justifications implausible.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{16} Zhao, 416-433; Womack, 53-89.
\textsuperscript{17} Holbig, 16; Beetham, 18.
The CCP achieved dominance in 1949 by portraying itself as the vanguard party in pursuit of the proletarian interest, a class-less society under communism. Mao’s personal charisma and active ideological engagement of the masses in every village instilled a quasi-religious belief in the pursuit of the communist paradise. Thus, the CCP’s legitimacy as the ruling party rested on progress toward the ultimate goal of communism, legitimacy through ideological performance. When Mao died the CCP lost its greatest asset: a charismatic leader that could convince the population of Communism’s imminent achievement. To save a crashing economy, Deng Xiaoping introduced trade reforms that exposed many urbanites to the luxuries of western capitalist life. Knowledge of the high quality of life outside China made it more difficult to justify the sacrifices citizens endured during the Cultural Revolution because of China’s communist ideology.

From Mao’s death in 1976 until the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989, popular disillusion toward the CCP’s claim of authority on the basis of ideology grew. With communist ideological performance discredited as a valid source of authority, the civically active began to stress moral and economic performance as important aspects of state legitimacy, two criteria that the CCP lacked. As protests grew into a bloody confrontation between Beijing residents and the Chinese army, it became clear that unless the government changed its legitimizing values to better match the changing beliefs of the population, destabilization would soon ensue.

To address this problem, after Tiananmen Square the CCP initiated a series of market-oriented reforms and redefined the national interest as the pursuit of economic dominance. This shift in the basis of authority instigated rapid growth that, within 15 years, turned China from a backward economy with high levels of

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18 Zhao, 422; Womack, 68-74.
19 Womack, 77-78.
20 Zhao, 423.
severe poverty into the third largest economy in the world. The CCP launched numerous patriotic campaigns on university campuses and in metropolitan areas to convince the youth and urban populations to see the government as the vanguard of the newly defined national interest. It also opened party membership to private business owners to appeal to the increasingly powerful middle and upper classes.

In 2001, the CCP radically redefined the basis of the government’s source of authority. This new definition, called the “three representatives,” states that in order to be accepted by the people, “the CCP must always represent the development of China’s advanced forces of production, the orientation of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese.”21 The three representatives is an official endorsement of private business over the state-owned industries Mao emphasized. This demonstrates, above all, that the CCP decided that abandoning its ideology was better than abandoning its power.

Despite the shift away from Maoist Communist ideology, the CCP remains loyal to the proletariat. To avoid losing the critical support of rural masses, the CCP introduced the “Harmonious Society,” in 2005, a set of new social and economic policies aimed at creating “societal balance and harmony” by improving the lives of the lower and middle classes. The “Harmonious Society” includes policies such as an abolition of all agricultural taxes, farming subsidies, prohibitions on local governments selling peasant’s land, and popular elections for village governments. In 2005 the CCP also announced an ambitious national health care service (for rural areas) and other welfare policies aimed at securing the allegiance of those whose lives do not improve with capitalism.22

21 Ibid., 425-246.
22 Ibid., 427.
Finally, the CCP has taken action to increase legitimization through demonstrable expression of consent (Beetham’s third criterion). Expressed consent involves the regular active demonstration of consent on the part of the masses (through the swearing of allegiance, participation in consultations, attendance of ceremonies and campaigns, etc.). Actions of expressive consent introduce a moral component and a sense of normative commitment into the citizen’s relationship with the state and confer legitimacy upon the government. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao relied on mass mobilization as an alternative to popular elections, and the cohesive nation-wide push towards communist goals during the Cultural Revolution conferred enormous legitimacy on his rule. In the 1990s, the CCP’s campaigns to instill nationalism helped quell unrest on university campuses.\(^23\) In preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the CCP launched a massive propaganda effort featuring the slogan “I Participate, I Contribute, and I am Happy” to mobilize the public and emphasize social unity and cohesion.\(^24\)

The greatest effects of expressed consent, however, are often seen in the negative expression of dissent. Withdrawal of consent through acts of public dissidence, as seen in June 1989, can be fatal to an authoritarian regime. The “Harmonious Society” policy initiatives aimed at calming rural Chinese who protested, sometimes violently, because of the widening gap between rich and poor.\(^25\) The CCP maintains tight control on what information is publicized and the way in which it is framed. Even the Internet is monitored and restricted, as are text messages and other new media outlets. Media coverage of protests and other overt actions of dissent is heavily censored in order to prevent the dissenting ideas from spreading among the population. Overall, the CCP spends significant time and money restricting


\(^{25}\) Zhao, 427.
both the occurrence and visibility of public protest, because in an authoritarian regime with no mechanism for the peaceful transition of power, mass de-legitimization is automatically followed by either violent repression or a revolution.  

**Conclusion**

Over the past twenty years the CCP has carefully reconstructed its political legitimacy in alignment with society’s beliefs. It refocused on the Confucian ideals of good governance, redefined its authority to rule on the basis of economic performance—a characteristic currently in plentiful supply—and made heavy use of propaganda to both mobilize active support and discredit reports of dissidence. The regime managed to survive a major shift in cultural values because it was quick to alter its own ideological focus to match. The CCP’s legitimacy continues to be strong both because of ongoing efforts to refine and maintain that legitimacy and because, due to its skillful ability to adjust its economy to match global economic trends, it continues to make demonstrable progress towards economic dominance. However, because the CCP rests its entire basis of authority on economic performance, as soon as China faces a recession that staggers economic growth the CCP’s legitimacy will face a crisis. Unfortunately for the CCP, it is impossible to sustain economic growth forever. What remains to be seen is what will come of the inevitable crisis; will it be a reversion to draconian authoritarianism and martial law, or the largest democratic revolution that the world has ever seen? Or, perhaps the CCP will devise a new source of authority as it did in the 1990s, reinventing itself yet again to maintain its hold on power in the most populous nation in the world.

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26 Brady, 434-457.
Bibliography


