

## **The China Paradox and American Misperceptions**

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China's journey into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a paradox of hope and fear. A triumphal mood has begun to take hold in the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the past decade. A series of historic events—China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Beijing's successful hosting of the Olympics, Shanghai's reemergence as a cosmopolitan center as evident in the recently held World Expo, the dynamic infrastructure development in both coastal and inland regions, the launch of the country's first manned space program, and the country's ever-growing economic power—have understandably instilled feelings of pride and optimism in the Chinese people.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, China's progress and promise have been accompanied by increasingly serious problems and pitfalls. Enormous economic disparities are arguably the most daunting problem China faces. In addition, rampant official corruption, a high unemployment rate, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, frequent public health crises and recurrent industrial accidents, growing rural discontent and urban worker strikes, inflation and skyrocketing high prices for housing in major cities, worsening ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang, the absence of an overriding system of beliefs or values, harsh media censorship and brutal crackdowns on political dissidents and religious activists all seem to suggest that the Chinese regime is sitting atop a simmering volcano of mass social unrest ready to explode.

Not surprisingly, these paradoxical developments have often led students of China to reach starkly contrasting assessments of the country's future trajectory and the abilities and intentions of its leadership. How can we reconcile the widely divergent phenomena mentioned above and reach a more accurate and balanced understanding of present-day China? How have U.S. perceptions of China changed in recent years and what factors tend to shape our perceptions of this rapidly changing country? What wisdom can we gain—and what lessons can we learn—from recent work in the field of China studies?

To a large extent, students of China must acquire the intellectual ability to live with complexity, tolerate ambiguity, and expect uncertainty. However, the immense complexity of our subject is no excuse for failing to use good judgment and to present well-grounded predictions. Rigorous, insightful assessments are particularly valuable today, when China has more influence on the world economy and regional security than perhaps at any other time in modern history. Misperceptions of China's socioeconomic conditions or misleading assessments of the quality and intentions of its leaders risk rendering our policies toward China ineffective.

This essay examines some of the prevailing U.S. perceptions of China over the past decade (2001-2010) with a focus on Chinese political and socioeconomic issues. This brief article, of course, does not aspire to present the “state-of-the-field,” nor is it based on comprehensive and quantitative research.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it aims to provide a critical assessment of the problems and challenges in the way the United States perceives China's political and socioeconomic developments as well as its future trajectory. In seeking to improve the quality of China watching in the United States in the coming years, this essay makes a concerted effort to explicate the field's deficiencies, such as prevalent misperceptions, blind

spots, topical obsessions or inadequacies, and methodological missteps, rather than showcase the field's accomplishments.

### **Better Access, Improved Analysis?**

In the first few decades of the establishment of the PRC, American China watchers had to make due with minimal access to primary source information and sources. The late Ellis Joffe, a prominent scholar of Chinese military affairs, once jokingly referred to his research on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as an exercise in "seeking truth from unavailable facts."<sup>3</sup> This has changed profoundly over the past decade. Today, many open sources of information are available online, even for the relatively sensitive subject of Chinese military affairs. For example, several dozen unofficial Chinese websites focus on military affairs. They provide extensive information about the biographical backgrounds of officers in the PLA, China's military strategies, the objectives of China's naval development in the new century, and the PRC's newly-obtained weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Three important developments—namely, rapid changes in telecommunications and the Internet, the availability of new open sources in the PRC, and unprecedented dynamic Sino-U.S. scholarly exchanges—have greatly altered the American scholarly approach to Chinese politics since the beginning of the new century. Fascinating developments in telecommunications, particularly the sudden arrival and meteoric growth of the Internet, have allowed Chinese sources (both official and non-official) to be more quickly and conveniently accessed, as well as more comprehensive. The ability to obtain information, including both hard data and individuals' opinions, has increased exponentially since the inception of the Internet. Given the availability of information on sensitive issues such as Chinese military

affairs, it is fair to assume that crucial information on other topics is also readily accessible online.

The information explosion that has resulted from the rapid growth of the Internet has, in a sense, created an “oversupply” of information—a new challenge for those who study China. Quite often, Western researchers of Chinese politics have found that they are “drowning in information but starved for knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> Having access to more information or more data does not necessarily translate into better scholarship or more insightful analysis. Currently, with perhaps a very small number of exceptions, the American scholars who study China have not produced groundbreaking work using Internet sources in any systematic or comprehensive way.

Since 2001, when former PRC President Yang Shangkun published his diary, China has witnessed the publication of a wave of memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies of senior leaders in the country, especially of those who had recently retired.<sup>6</sup> Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, Li Ruihuan, Zhang Zhen, and Qian Qichen all published their memoirs and/or diaries. In fact, these biographical writings have not only been confined to retired leaders. The biographies of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, which were written by two senior Chinese journalists and published in Hong Kong and Taiwan, are also available in bookstores across the Mainland.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the popular Chinese newspaper *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekly) often publishes long profiles and interviews with rising stars in the provincial and ministerial leadership.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, prominent public intellectuals such as Wang Jisi, Wu Jinglian, Yu Keping, Hu Angang, Sun Liping, Cai Fang, Fang Ning, Xu Xianming, Wang Yizhou, and Li Peilin have been invited to brief decision-makers and/or give lectures at Politburo meetings.

American research institutions and scholars have been increasingly engaged in institution-building and social science research in China during the past decade, which has

included an unprecedented number of scholars and students studying and/or visiting China. They have participated in a wide variety of collaborative projects, many of which had never been permitted in the PRC or had been suspended due to the 1989 Tiananmen incident. For example, Yale University's China Law Center, established in 1999, "is making tremendous strides in the areas of administrative law, regulation, and legal education in the PRC," according to Yale President Richard C. Levin.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the Yale China Law Center is also an excellent venue in which to study China's economic, political, social and legal changes and to train the new generation of American China specialists.

Another example is the survey research collaboration between Beijing University and the University of Michigan. This joint research project provides access to a sample of 10,000 Chinese families in Henan and Liaoning provinces, allowing scholars to examine various aspects of their social, economic, educational, and healthcare conditions. This longitudinal research project studying these two provinces will be updated every two years.<sup>10</sup> All of these new instances of collaboration help to facilitate intellectual and political discourse among, expand the sources of information available to, and broaden the analytical perspectives of, American China watchers. Yet, tighter political controls on the part of the Chinese government, such as in the case of Xu Zhiyong and his work at the Open Constitution Initiative supported by the Yale China Law Center, remain serious constraining factors that risk severely damaging international academic collaboration and China's image in the world.

Unfortunately, these aforementioned developments do not always lead to a more insightful and more accurate understanding of Chinese politics. Generally speaking, the field of Chinese political studies in the United States is still inadequate both in the depth and breadth of its coverage. One may reasonably argue that the field has not yet taken advantage of—in any substantial or systematic way—several new developments that facilitate research in the field,

such as the Internet revolution, the availability of new and open sources in China, and the multi-dimensional collaboration between American scholars in China studies and their counterparts in the PRC. Instead, many analysts have unfortunately gravitated to one of two extremes. Some remain burdened by stale perceptions, vulnerable to rumors, and are obsessed with investigating information obtained from unverified “secret documents” in China. Meanwhile, other American scholars and prominent observers have become so impressed by the “achievements” of the Chinese leadership that they have lost their critical lens and sometimes overlook the fundamental deficiencies and flaws of China’s contemporary political system.

### **False Predictions and Wrong Lessons**

American studies of contemporary China have not been without rather glaring false predictions and blind spots. For example, even the most optimistic analysts did not foresee the sheer rapidity and sustainability of China’s economic growth over the past three decades. It is also interesting to note that with only a couple of exceptions, no scholarly attention was dedicated to China’s oil supply and energy issues prior to 2001, despite the fact that China began importing oil in 1994 and its increasing need for energy security was already a foregone conclusion. A majority of “mainstream” China experts, including Washington-based strategic thinkers, seemed to pay little attention to this profoundly important and multi-dimensional issue throughout the 1990s. It appears the China studies community in the United States has only recently realized the importance of the huge demand for oil in this rapidly industrializing country and its implications for domestic and foreign policy.

Despite improved access and other positive developments for American China scholars, poorly-considered predictions and assessments have still plagued the field over the

past decade. As the new century began, a large number of China analysts and experts held a very pessimistic view of the fate of the Chinese regime. For example, three major events—China’s accession to the WTO in 2001, the Chinese leadership succession in the 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in 2002, and the SARS epidemic in 2003—were all seen as formidable triggering factors. Many China analysts predicted at the time that any one of them would lead to chaos or even the collapse of the regime. Gordon Chang’s 2001 book, *The Coming Collapse of China*, was one of the most frequently cited monographs on China in the first half of the decade.<sup>11</sup>

Western analysts’ inaccurate or false predictions in all three of these cases can help to highlight the deficiencies and inadequacies of the field of China studies. There are multiple causes for these inaccurate predictions. A common problem in American studies of Chinese elite politics, for example, is that researchers tend to use unverified sources, conventional approaches, and old analytical frameworks to analyze a rapidly changing country. Rumors, speculations, and myths, rather than verifiable facts and data, have remained the main sources in many U.S. analyses of Chinese politics.

Toward the end of the decade, a large number of China analysts seem to have gone to the other extreme. They began to perceive the Chinese political system as being “resilient.” The logic holds that Chinese leaders seem to have found a sustainable way to maintain their rule over this emerging economic powerhouse. Meanwhile, a large number of China watchers in the United States seem to be fixated on growing Chinese confidence and arrogance, and tend to overlook the vulnerability of the authoritarian one-party system, the serious difficulties it faces, and even the possibility of a failure to broker deals between competing factions in the next leadership transition.

One of the central arguments of the “authoritarian resilience” thesis is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has relied on economic development and material incentives for the Chinese people to prevent sociopolitical challenges. New socioeconomic forces, especially entrepreneurs and the emerging middle class, are understood as political allies of the CCP regime. But this perception should be subject to greater debate. Just as yesterday’s political target could be today’s political ally, so too could today’s political ally become tomorrow’s political rabble-rouser. Recent studies conducted in China have found that the Chinese middle class tends to be more cynical about the policy promises made by the authorities, more demanding about policy implementation, and more sensitive with regard to corruption among officials than other social groups.<sup>12</sup> If middle class Chinese begin to feel that their voices are being suppressed, that their access to information is unjustly being blocked, and/or that their space for social action is unduly confined, a political uprising of sorts may take place.<sup>13</sup>

The Chinese middle class’s grievances over government policy have become increasingly evident in recent years. The increasing unemployment rate among recent college graduates (who usually come from middle class families and are presumed to be members of China’s future middle class) should send an alarming signal to the Chinese government. In a recent forum on China’s response to the global financial crisis held by the Academy of Chinese Reform and Development in Beijing, Chinese scholars argued that the government should pay much greater attention to the needs and concerns of the middle class—otherwise, they argued, the “sensitive” Chinese middle class will become the “angry” middle class.<sup>14</sup>

On the upcoming leadership succession to take place at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress scheduled for the fall of 2012, some prominent China watchers seem to be overly optimistic about the likelihood of a peaceful, orderly, and institutionalized transition. The most notable

recent example is a book published by Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a businessman-turned biographer of the PRC's senior leaders. Through extensive interviews with many rising stars of the so-called fifth generation of PRC leaders, Kuhn offered nothing but praise for their talents, wisdom, and vision.<sup>15</sup> The book presents an unambiguous assessment that Xi Jinping's and Li Keqing's succession to the positions currently held by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao is very much a done-deal; and that as a team, the fifth generation of leaders will take over power smoothly from the fourth generation in 2012, similar to the transition at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2002 when the Hu-Wen fourth generation succeeded the third-generation leaders Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji.

The fifth-generation leaders, indeed, can collectively boast remarkable life experiences. Their formative experiences during the Cultural Revolution, especially the fact that many of them worked as farmers for several years, forced these future leaders to cultivate valuable traits such as endurance, adaptability, and humility. Their exposure to Western ideas and values in their college years in the late 70s and early 80s, one of the most liberal periods of university education in contemporary China, made their worldviews differ from the preceding generations of PRC leaders. Their shared leadership experiences in running provinces and cities in the course of the country's rapid economic development in the 1990s appears to have prepared them well, as they are now on the cusp of reaching the pinnacle of power.

The optimistic view espoused by Kuhn completely missed the weaknesses of the fifth-generation leaders, especially some of its top contenders. Xi and Li will need to overcome many daunting obstacles in order to consolidate their power in the years ahead. They are much weaker in a variety of ways than Hu and Wen were when the two were in line to succeed Jiang and Zhu in 2002. At that time, among the fourth-generation leaders, Hu

Jintao was the only one who had served as a provincial party secretary in two provinces. He had also been on the Politburo Standing Committee for 10 years. Hu was very well known for his political savvy, strong networking based on the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), and uncontroversial rhetorical ability.

Xi Jinping, in contrast, does not stand out in the same way among his competitors within the fifth generation. In fact, among the 344 full and alternate members of the 15<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in 1997, Xi received the fewest votes.<sup>16</sup> The fact that he served only eight months as Party Secretary of Shanghai before being promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee made his rise widely seen as helicopter-like and slightly befuddling. Up until now, Xi has failed to form his own political network of peers and members of lower echelons of the Chinese leadership. Most importantly, as with other prominent figures in the fifth generation, Xi's capacity and leadership skills have yet to be tested.

Some of Xi's public remarks have been highly controversial. For example, Xi said the following during his visit to Mexico in 2009, "It seems there are some foreigners who've stuffed their bellies and don't have anything else to do but point fingers. First, China does not export revolution. Second, we're not exporting hunger or poverty. And third, we aren't making trouble for you. What else is there to say?" These rather impolitic comments accusing American politicians of "interfering in China's domestic affairs" were characterized even by many Chinese bloggers as "undiplomatic" and "non-statesmanlike."<sup>17</sup>

In the case of Li Keqiang, who is expected to succeed Wen Jiabao as Premier, there are fears that he has neither Premier Zhu Rongji's political guts nor Wen Jiabao's charisma and human touch. Zhu and Wen were already known for their leadership talents and administrative achievements when they were vice premiers or even earlier in their

careers. Wen Jiabao worked as a chief of staff for three secretary generals of the CCP, two of whom were purged, and yet he managed not only to survive, but also to rise rapidly. It is also interesting to note that Wen had gained broad administrative experience before becoming premier—coordinating power transitions, commanding the anti-flood campaign in 1998, supervising the nation’s agricultural affairs, and overseeing financial and banking reform. Wen’s talent as a superb administrator and his role as a coalition-builder explain his legendary survival and success. In particular, Premier Wen has been known, both at home and abroad, for his remarkably quick response during natural disasters and other crises. For instance, for each and every major earthquake that has hit China over the past decade (including the periods when he was vice premier or a member of the Secretariat), Wen always arrived at the disaster area promptly.

In contrast, Li has become known for his slow reaction to crises, including the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and the Yushu earthquake early this year. One may argue that as a rising star, he needs to be cautious and avoid too much publicity, but this was certainly not the case for other leaders such as Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao when they served as vice premiers, and Wang Qishan when he was a provincial-level leader.

Li Keqiang, of course, has his strengths. His humble family background, low-profile personality, legal education, familiarity with economic issues, reputation for loyalty, strong political network (the CCYL), and especially his provincial leadership experience, may prepare him well for the job. But it will be difficult for him to claim any major achievements as a provincial chief or vice premier. During his tenure as vice premier, he has been responsible for the structural reform of the major ministries and commissions (*dabuwei gaige*), but this project seems to have gone nowhere, in sharp contrast with Zhu Rongji’s restructuring of the Chinese bureaucracy, which resulted in

substantial personnel changes and significantly increased efficiency of the central government.

Also of concern is that, in the eyes of the Chinese public, Li may appear too “soft,” even softer than Premier Wen Jiabao. It has been widely noted that the State Council has become less effective in controlling China’s provinces, major cities, and even key state-owned-enterprises when it comes to economic policies. A recently-circulated barb, which suggests that “the premier cannot control a general manager” (*zongli guanbuliao zongjingli*), reflects this serious problem of the central government’s administrative capacity.<sup>18</sup> Having a new premier with such a soft image would not fit well with the need for a more efficient and effective central government to coordinate all of its various policy initiatives.<sup>19</sup>

A factor that makes the upcoming Chinese leadership succession even more uncertain is that other rising stars in the fifth generation, most noticeably Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai and Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang, have launched unremitting self-promotion campaigns that have garnered great publicity in the country.<sup>20</sup> Their unconventional and bold efforts to tap public opinion to seek political advancement may change the dynamics in which future leaders jockey for power. The daunting socioeconomic and political challenges that face the fifth generation leaders will likely spur other leaders to reach out to the public for support. The growing power and influence of the military elites may also complicate the political succession. The country may soon witness an even more dynamic and perhaps even more factionalized phase in its arduous political transformation.

## **Final Thought**

The field of American studies of Chinese politics must avoid hewing to conventional, old-fashion perceptions of this rapidly-changing country, taking special care to steer clear of dogmatic cynicism on the one hand, and ill-grounded optimism or wishful thinking on the other. We need to be fully aware of the new institutional norms and rapidly changing rules of the game in Chinese elite politics. But at the same time, we cannot allow ourselves to be led astray by superficial phenomena or official propaganda in China. Unless and until we honestly recognize and work to fix the major deficiencies of our field and the enduring misperceptions in our analysis, we will not be able to propose wise and effective U.S. policies toward China.

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**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> For the rise of Chinese optimism, see Hu Angang, *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower*. (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive reviews of the field in the earlier years of the reform era, see Harry Harding, “The Study of Chinese Politics: Toward a Third Generation of Scholarship.” *World Politics*, vol. 36 (January 1984): 284-307; David Shambaugh, ed., *American Studies of Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993); Elizabeth J. Perry, “Trends in the Studies of Chinese Politics: State-Society Relations,” *China Quarterly*, no. 139 (September 1994): 704-713. For a more recent excellent review, see Lynn White, “Chinese Political Studies: Overview of the State of the Field.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 14, no. 3 (September 2009): 229-251.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Bates Gill and James Mulvenon, “Chinese Military-Related Think Tanks and Research Institutions.” *China Quarterly*, no. 171 (September 2002): 617.

<sup>4</sup> It was recently reported in the Western media that much information about China’s naval development was first obtained through Chinese websites. See <http://www.chinesenewsnet.com>. June 24, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1988); and John Naisbitt, *China's Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society*. (New York: HarperBusiness, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Yang Shangkun, *Yang Shangkun riji* (Yang Shangkun’s diary), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2001; and Yang Shangkun, *Yang Shangkun huiyilu* (Yang Shangkun’s memoir), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Ma Ling and Li Ming, *Hu Jintao – Ta cong nali lai, Jiang xiang hechu qu* (Hu Jintao: From where did he come and to where will he go), Hong Kong: Mingbao chubanshe, 2002; and Ma Ling and Li Ming, *Wen Jiabao*. Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For example, rising stars in provincial leadership with Suzhou origin were profiled in *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern weekly), November 18, 2004, sec. A, pp. 1–2.

<sup>9</sup> Richard C. Levin, “Foreword,” in Cheng Li, ed. *Bridging Minds across the Pacific: U.S.-China Educational Exchanges 1978-2003*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005, p. xiv.

<sup>10</sup> *Shijie ribao*, June 22, 2005, p. C1.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Zhang Yi, “Dangdai Zhongguo zhongchan jieceng de zhengzhi taidu” [Political Attitudes of the Middle Stratum in Contemporary China]. *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [Chinese Social Sciences] 2 (Summer 2008).

<sup>13</sup> For more detailed discussion of the complicated and changing role of the middle class in Chinese politics, see Cheng Li, ed., *China’s Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Hu Xiao, “Yi gaige yifu jingji weiji” [Accelerate Reforms to Respond to the Economic Crisis] in *Zhongguo Jingji Shibao* [China Economic Times], March 3, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *How China’s Leaders Think*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> See [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-01/22/content\\_629535.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-01/22/content_629535.htm).

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<sup>17</sup> The quote was based on Joshua Cooper Ramo, “Hu’s Visit: Finding a Way Forward on U.S.-China Relations,” *Time*, April 8, 2010. Also see <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1978640-5,00.html>.

<sup>18</sup> *Shijie ribao* (World Journal), April 19, 2010, p. A10.

<sup>19</sup> The above discussion on Xi and Li is based on Cheng Li, “China’s Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012 (Part 2 Cabinet Ministers)” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 32 (Spring 2010), and Cheng Li, “New Challenges in Predicting China’s Upcoming Political Succession” *China Business Review* (November-December 2010): 36-39.

<sup>20</sup> For more discussion on this see Cheng Li, “China’s Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012 (Part 1 Provincial Chiefs)” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 31 (Winter 2010).