Commentary

Authoritarian Populists: China’s New Generation of Leaders

BY MERLE GOLDMAN

The Fourth Generation of Chinese Communist Party leaders, which came to power in 2002-03, differs markedly from its predecessors. Unlike the First Generation of Communist leaders, they are not revolutionaries who led their party in civil war, established a Communist party-state, imposed state control over the economy and society, and gradually concentrated absolute power in one man—Mao Zedong. Nor is the Fourth Generation like the Second Generation led by Deng Xiaoping, who in the late 1970s launched China’s move to the market and into the international arena, dismantling totalitarian controls over personal life, while maintaining the Communist party-state. Neither does it resemble the Third Generation led by the former Shanghai mayor Jiang Zemin, which sparked the economic rise of China’s coastal areas and private entrepreneurship and further loosened controls over intellectual and personal life despite having arrested the leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrators and cracked down harshly on the Buddhist-Daoist Falun Gong sect.

False Hopes

Outside observers and Chinese reformers had hoped that the younger, better educated Fourth Generation of leaders, led by party head Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao would carry out political liberalization to match China’s sweeping economic reforms. Unlike the previous generations, these leaders and their associates are primarily technocrats, educated at China’s top universities: Peking University and Tsinghua, China’s MIT. In addition, Hu Jintao was a disciple of the former head of the Communist Youth League, Hu Yaobang, who was long associated with relatively liberal policies. After Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, Hu Yaobang rehabilitated virtually all the victims of Mao’s ideological campaigns and attempted to introduce political reforms

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in the mid-1980s, leading to his purge from the position of party head in January 1987. His death on April 15, 1989 sparked the historic demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Wen Jiabao had been a disciple of Hu Yaobang’s successor, Zhao Ziyang, another advocate of political reforms, including an unprecedented attempt to separate the party from the government in the late 1980s, and thereby dissolve the Communist party-state. Wen had accompanied Zhao on his visit to Tiananmen Square to express his sympathy with the students just before the June 4 military crackdown on the demonstrators. Zhao was subsequently purged because he was unwilling to go along with the crackdown.

Unlike their immediate predecessors, China’s Fourth Generation of Communist leaders have narrowed the public space for political discourse and have stepped up the arrest and repression of editors, journalists, cyber-dissidents, and public intellectuals. Yet in contrast to the Second and Third Generations, the Fourth Generation of party leaders has faced up to the increasing inequalities that accompanied China’s move to the market and has sought to address the accelerating disparities in wealth between the rural and urban areas. Unlike the Third Generation of leaders, which came mainly from the coastal and urban areas, the Fourth Generation leaders were officials in China’s poorer rural provinces and are consequently more concerned with the plight of the farmers. After initially benefiting from the breakup of the communes and the land reform carried out in the 1980s, which allowed farmers to till their own family plots of land once again, the rural sector fell behind economically in the 1990s. Farmers’ incomes and quality of education and healthcare lagged behind that of city residents as the urban areas took off economically in the 1990s and China’s manufacturers began producing for the international market as well as for China’s expanding domestic markets.

Whereas the policies of the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin generations of leaders accelerated China’s internationalist and urbanizing trends, Hu and Wen have focused on ameliorating the inequalities caused by the increasing domestic economic disparities. To this end, the Hu-Wen leadership has reduced the taxes on farmers by doing away with the tax on cash crops other than tobacco. While farmers still have to pay income and local taxes and fees, the elimination of the agricultural tax to the central government is unprecedented in Chinese history, and may help to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas. Moreover, the Fourth Generation of leaders has pledged to help pay for schooling in rural communities, hitherto the obligation of the local government. Under the previous arrangement, farmers struggled to pay education fees for their children. Consequently, rural teachers were paid meager wages and some children did not go to school. The Fourth

CHINA’S AUTHORITARIAN POPULISTS

Fall | Winter 2006 21
Generation has also reduced the discriminatory regulations against workers from the countryside migrating to the cities in search of jobs. Finally, it is beginning to deal with the environmental degradation of China’s air and waterways, which disproportionately affect farmers, and has been caused by China’s breakneck speed of 9 to 10 percent economic growth in the past twenty-five years.

An Unyielding Grip

Yet, despite the Fourth Generation’s attempts to bridge the growing economic and social disparities between China’s rural and urban areas, it continues to limit the public’s discussion of these disparities as well as that of other political topics. China’s media have borne the brunt of these restrictions. With China’s move to the market, most of China’s media outlets are no longer funded by the state and are forced to self-finance. In order to gain readership and survive financially, the media has become more wide-ranging and daring. Whereas the Jiang leadership did not pay much attention to this development in the late 1990s, soon after Hu Jintao came to power, he arrested a number of outspoken journalists in an effort to rein in the media. Among those arrested was Zhao Yan, an assistant in the Beijing office of the New York Times who had supposedly leaked “confidential” information in 2004 about changes in the political leadership. Although the charge of leaking state secrets was dismissed in August 2006, sparing him a ten-year prison sentence, Zhao was sentenced to three years in prison on a lesser, unrelated charge of fraud.¹ The harsh punishment may have been related to his previous reporting on farming issues for a Chinese magazine and his work as an activist and advocate for peasants abused by corrupt local officials—just the issues with which the Fourth Generation is concerned. Shi Tao, another journalist, was arrested and subsequently sentenced to ten years in prison for sending an e-mail detailing a government warning to journalists against reporting on the fifteenth anniversary of the June 4 crackdown. The American company Yahoo helped track down Shi.²

Even though the party leadership belatedly announced in December 2005 the news of a massive benzene chemical spill in the Songhua River in China’s northeast—the Songhua runs into Russia’s Amur River—when the popular tabloid Beijing News reported on the spill, its editor, Yang Bin, was purged. The Beijing News also attracted attention when it reported on government corruption and violent land disputes between farmers and local officials who...
sought to take their land for development. In addition, the Beijing News also had a “letters to the editor” section, which is rare in Chinese newspapers. Even though the Beijing News was regarded as relatively moderate politically, and was reporting on issues that the party considers central, the removal of its editor demonstrated that even slight divergences from the party’s views may be punished. When the Chinese blogger Zhao Jing, whose online pen name is An Ti, discussed the firing of the editor and the subsequent protest strike of Beijing News journalists on his website, the blog was removed with the help of Microsoft’s MSN, and Zhao Jing was detained by Chinese authorities. U.S. companies such as Yahoo, MSN, and Google have also filtered certain words, including “democracy” and “political rights,” from Chinese websites. These companies comply with the government’s decrees in order to stay in business in China.

Hu Jintao’s tightening of controls over political discourse in the media and the Internet also extends to public intellectuals. The military doctor Jiang Yanyong, who publicly countered the party’s 2003 assertion that the SARS epidemic had been brought under control, was detained and then put under surveillance in 2004 after issuing a public letter calling on the party to change its designation of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration from a “counterrevolutionary” to a “patriotic” movement. Public intellectuals such as freelance writers Yu Jie and Liu Xiaobo, who had been purged from the intellectual establishment for advocating political reforms, were put under surveillance in December 2005 for organizing a public letter signed by fifty intellectuals protesting the party’s violent repression of farmers’ protests against the building of a power plant in Dongzhou, a village near Guangzhou.

In September 2004, the Southern People’s Weekly published a list of the “Top Fifty Public Intellectuals.” This weekly, a product of the Guangzhou Daily Southern media group, is one of China’s most daring. In an accompanying commentary, the Weekly praised public intellectuals, pointing out that “This is the time when China is facing the most problems in its unprecedented transformation, and when it most needs public intellectuals to be on the scene and to speak out.” The list was dominated by intellectuals who had called for freedom of the press, speech, and association in their articles.

On November 23, 2004 an article in the Shanghai Party Committee’s orthodox Liberation Daily attacked the concept of “public intellectuals,” claiming that
their “independence...drives a wedge” between the intellectuals and the party and the intellectuals and the masses.” It asserted that China’s intellectuals belonged to the working class, under the leadership of the party and therefore could not be independent. Moreover, despite the fact that throughout much of Chinese history, Confucian scholars had spoken out publicly on political issues, the newspaper denounced the concept of “public intellectuals” as a foreign import. The Liberation Daily article was then reprinted in the party’s official mouthpiece, People’s Daily, giving the criticism of public intellectuals the party’s official imprimatur.

Even though the Fourth Generation of party leaders themselves acknowledge the increasing inequalities spawned by China’s economic reforms, the leaders have suppressed public intellectuals who draw public attention to the issue without government sanction. This phenomenon can be seen specifically in the Fourth Generation’s treatment of the 2004 book A Survey of Chinese Peasants, written by Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao and based on interviews over several years with farmers in the poor province of Anhui. This husband-and-wife team, who spent their early years in the countryside, described the developers’ seizure of the land of rural residents without providing adequate compensation and the imposition of unfair taxes by local officials, issues that had become the focus of growing farmers’ protests. Their vivid depiction of the increasingly impoverished lives of the peasants and local officials’ abuse of power and collusion with developers drew attention to the same problems the Fourth Generation of leadership had declared it sought to alleviate. Yet in February 2004, just one month after its publication, their book was banned.

Along with the crackdown on a number of specific public intellectuals, editors, journalists, and cyber-dissidents, the Hu Jintao government has also tightened controls over the media in general. News reports on peasant and worker demonstrations and the growing protests against corrupt officials and property confiscation were banned and the reporters and intellectuals who wrote about them were purged. Those who protested against the ban, such as journalism professor Jiao Guobiao, who had also criticized the repressive controls on the Internet, lost their positions. Jiao was barred from teaching at Peking University. Another public intellectual, Wang Yi, a law lecturer at Chengdu University who called for freedom of speech and association, was likewise barred from teaching. Even the editor-in-chief of the China Youth Daily, the newspaper affiliated with Hu Jintao’s Communist Youth League...
power base, which had been very aggressive in exposing official corruption, was forced to step down.\textsuperscript{9}

In addition to the clamp down on political discourse, Hu Jintao has increased government scrutiny of NGOs, especially those receiving foreign funding. Like Vladimir Putin in Russia, China’s Fourth Generation of leaders fear a “color revolution” similar to the ones that brought democratic leadership to the post-Soviet countries of Ukraine and Georgia. In addition to stressing the dominance of the Communist Party and mandating the study of Marxist ideology, Hu has revived the practice of party members writing self-criticisms with the launching in 2005 of a massive ideological campaign among China’s 70.8 million party members to reform their thought, all of which is reminiscent of the ideological campaigns during the Mao era (1949-76).

**Repression for a New Century**

Why is such a well-educated political leadership, one concerned with China’s social ills, so intent on suppressing freedom of speech and association? In addition to the rising number of protests across the country and criticisms in market-oriented media outlets, China’s embrace of new communications technologies—the internet, cellular phones, and text messaging—makes it increasingly difficult for the party to maintain the tight control over peoples’ views that existed in the Mao era. If a blogger’s website is blocked, he or she can move onto another server or to a Hong Kong or foreign proxy. In addition, bloggers use code words to discuss sensitive political issues. Moreover, the implosion of the Soviet Union following Mikhail Gorbachev’s toleration of greater freedom of speech and association deters any Chinese party leader from following a similar path. In fact, China’s party leaders’ crackdown on dissent and independent political discourse is done to ensure that China’s Communist Party and its leaders do not suffer the fate of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, unlike the Mao period when millions were harshly persecuted for the acts of a small number, in the post-Mao period persecution for political dissent does not reach far beyond the accused and their immediate associates. While hundreds have lost their positions in the establishment and scores have been imprisoned, others are briefly detained and then able to find jobs in China’s market economy and burgeoning civil society. They continue to use the new technologies for political discourse and to cite the stipulations of freedom of the press and association in China’s constitution to fight against the Fourth Generation of leaders’ renewed imposition of political and ideological controls. Whether the methods of China’s authoritarian populist leaders or those of China’s public intellectuals, journalists, editors
and cyber-dissidents ultimately succeed in dealing with the urgent problems of increasing inequalities, growing protests and environmental degradation will determine the course of Chinese politics in the twenty-first century.

Notes

2 Peter Goodman, “Yahoo Says It Gave China Internet Data: Journalist Jailed by Tracing E-mail,” Washington Post, 10 September, 2006.
7 Ibid.