

## Political Reform and Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China

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### Summary

While China's economic and social reforms have gained much attention internationally, the CCP regime's efforts at political structural reform (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*) initiated by Deng Xiaoping have been widely ignored by China scholars so far. Political reforms that do not aim at abolishing one-party rule to the benefit of some form of Western liberal (multi-party) democracy are not taken seriously by most observers of China's modernisation process. This article hypothesizes that these reforms do actually affect regime legitimacy in a positive way and should therefore be carefully analysed in order to explain the "authoritarian resilience" of Communist one-party rule. It is argued that political reform in its limited sense of enhancing cadre efficiency and accountability (instead of empowering the *demos vis-à-vis* the state) may, indeed, help to effectively prolong one-party rule in contemporary China.

### I. Introduction: A legitimacy crisis?

China has been experiencing a dynamic process of economic reform and social modernisation for more than 25 years now. For those who follow the country's transformation as attentively as China scholars do, this process is primarily associated with China's market transformation. The country seems to confirm at least one part of Fukuyama's "end of history," i.e. the eventual rise of market economies all over the world after the end of the Cold War and the downfall of Soviet socialism (Fukuyama 1992). Still, China's economic trajectory since the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s, and especially its reform path since the early 1990s, has been profoundly different from developments in Central Europe and in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, including Russia. Three specific features of the Chinese market transformation immediately come to mind, as Andrew Walder (2004: 190-192) has recently pointed out again:

1. The Communist Party survived the critical period after 1989 and has been revitalised since then instead of tumbling into decay. Unlike so many other post-Communist regimes, its elites have not been forced from power; on the

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