

# The New Normal: A Neopolitical Turn in China's Reform Era

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## Abstract:

China's efforts on anti-corruption, centralization, and official calls for governing according to moral and national traditions are reshaping the country's politics and economy. How do we understand these changes, and what do they imply for scholarship on nondemocratic politics? In terms of China, the changes taking place significantly alter politics in the Reform era but do not signal its end. To demonstrate this claim, this paper details both how these changes move away from prior Reform era actions and at the same time how they remain rooted in this period rather than indicating the beginning of a new era of Chinese politics. Reform Era governance has been aggressively technocratic, until the recent neopolitical turn. The decentralized economic governance of the early reform era emphasized a small number of statistical measures of performance, namely GDP growth and fiscal revenue. Combined with weak monitoring, this limited aperture generated solid growth outcomes but also produced significant negative externalities such as corruption, pollution, and local debt. As the costs of technocratic rule mounted, the center altered course, increasing monitoring of locals and promoting official morality among the officers of the party-state. Yet even though changes can be seen even in unexpected policy domains such as legal reform and urbanization, they retain continuity with the broad context of the Reform era emphasizing performance as justification for continued Party rule. What has changed is that performance is being decoupled from particular statistical outcome measures and instead replaced with a discourse of correct processes paired with an openness about repression. More broadly, these conclusions show that the new authoritarianism literature still has substantial space to explore how authoritarians rule.

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The drama was high and the tension thick when President Xi Jinping visited Hebei to attend what became four marathon “democratic life meetings” over two days following months of preparation. On the verge of tears, officials admitted their failings to Xi and the country’s people via Chinese Central Television.<sup>2</sup> Zhou Benshun, the province’s party secretary, stated, “I cared very much about development speed and economic volumes but not as much about people’s own interests.”<sup>3</sup> This emotional display of political conflict—explicitly attacking the value of quantitative metrics of performance—is but one example introducing a new normal in Chinese politics.

In the past few years, politics in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been remade. Both institutional and rhetorical changes characterize this neopolitical “new normal (新常态),” which coincides with Xi Jinping’s rise to the top of the party-state hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Xi has been described as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong,<sup>5</sup> but these changes extend well beyond Xi himself. Political authority has been centralized in the anti-corruption unit of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Central Commission on Discipline Inspection, while complaints against officials have begun to air publicly, commercial and state-run media broadcast cadres’ self-criticisms, and leaders push to imbue officialdom with traditional morals.<sup>6</sup> The public airing of criticisms and self-criticisms has not been limited to officials. Repression and humiliation have been used against critics as wide-ranging as Hong Kong booksellers, feminist activists, and rights lawyers, among others.<sup>7</sup>

How do we understand political change inside of nondemocratic polities? Over the past two decades, a spate of new authoritarianism research has emerged, focusing on regime survival and the institutions inside of these regimes; however, works that

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<sup>2</sup> (“大胆使用批评和自我批评有力武器,” 2013; 央视网, 2013). See also (“Critical masses,” 2013; C. Huang, 2013b; Zhang, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> (“Critical masses,” 2013; 央视网, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese phrase “新常态 (*xinchangtai*, new normal)” has been invoked recently to describe the apparent slowdown of China’s breakneck economic growth, e.g. (Spence, 2015). I use the term more broadly to reflect the changes in both the economic and political systems of China.

<sup>5</sup> Claims about of his building a personality cult like Chairman Mao and questions have been raised about his willingness to leave office in 2022 when his second term as president concludes. For examples about Xi’s influence and personality cult, see (Jacobs & Buckley, 2015; Lam, 2015; Phillips, 2014). (Martin & Cohen, 2014) points in this direction but notes limits in the comparison between Mao and Xi.

<sup>6</sup> See (Xinhua, 2013a, 2013b) on official statements about the anti-corruption and morals campaigns. See (Demick, 2013) on self-criticisms being aired on Chinese TV. The centralization appears to be located in Beijing rather than being a boon for provincial governments as was a previous moment’s “soft centralization” (Mertha, 2005). Traditional here refers to a blend of Maoist and Imperial political thought. The Central Commission on Discipline Inspection has both CCDI and CDIC as common English acronyms.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. (Browne, 2016; Goldkorn, Bandurski, Rosenzweig, & Cheung, 2016; Zeng, 2015).

distinguish between more subtle shifts remain rare.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Polity and other continuous measures of democracy rarely capture such moves in their scores, as they are more focused on the democracy-dictatorship divide.<sup>9</sup> New multi-dimensional measures of authoritarian rule can capture some aspects of change, namely shifts in personalism and institutionalization of power, but even they overlook policy and rhetorical adjustments.<sup>10</sup> I argue that scholars of authoritarianism should push to understand the size, purpose, and form of authoritarian regimes, and use this framework to analyze developments in contemporary Chinese politics.<sup>11</sup>

The remaking of Chinese politics over the past half-decade has led some watchers of its politics to claim that the Reform Era is ending.<sup>12</sup> Instead, I argue that the Chinese regime is shifting its mix of strategies away from a technocratic rule where numbers dominate and the institutions of control attempt to be invisible to a new more politicized environment.<sup>13</sup> These changes are not so radical as to signal the end of the Reform era, let alone the end of the regime itself.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they can be thought of as adjustments to the regime's size, purpose, and form. Centralization decreases the effective size of the regime, and rhetorical and bureaucratic changes reflect modifications to its purpose and form. To demonstrate this claim's validity requires both detailing how these changes differ from prior Reform Era governance and how they still remain fruitfully rooted in this period rather than the beginning of some new era of Chinese politics.<sup>15</sup> That is, this chapter's framework shows this New Normal as occupying a middle ground between those who argue nothing has changed and those who say everything has.

The political transformation at the start of the Reform Era engendered difficulties that were in part solved by central leaders choosing to limit their ability to monitor local governments. The limited information that was observed focused on a few quantified outcomes—most notably: GDP, fiscal revenue, population control, and social stability—and produced strong results on these metrics but simultaneously generated substantial

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<sup>8</sup> (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2014; Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> (Malesky et al., 2017)

<sup>10</sup> (Marquez, 2016; Svolik, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Another formulation focuses on the questions: who rules, why, and how.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Minzner 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Although the populace-facing local governments are bound to fail to remain unseen, and, of course, do not help themselves on this score in their building of grandiose monuments to their own power and for their own comforts. For examples of such grandiose buildings, see (Kuo & Watts, 2013); the overawing nature of such facilities also should not be overlooked, e.g. (Scott, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> c.f. (C. Minzner, 2014, 2015a)

<sup>15</sup> For the latter, see (C. Minzner, 2015a).

negative externalities—corruption, pollution, hidden local debt, and low quality statistics—in other dimensions. This institutional schema helps account for China’s rapid economic growth, the challenges the country faces, and the actions currently being undertaken to address them.<sup>16</sup> The neopolitical turn—changing rhetoric, centralization, anti-corruption, public repression, and more—is a two-pronged response to these challenges. The neopolitical turn attempts to fix that old system and hedges against the chance that the old system is unfixable. The fix addresses the prior system’s accumulated costs by increasing control over local officials, while the hedge provides new political tentpoles supporting regime continuance should economic performance deteriorate further.

The paper continues as follows. After emphasizing the conventional view of the significance of the transition between Mao and post-Mao China, I examine the reform era through the lens of information. This lens exposes the increasing problems with local officials hiding facts—about pollution, corruption, and facts themselves. Next, I argue that the new normal is a neopolitical turn in Chinese politics, highlighting institutional and rhetorical facets. I contrast my argument with alternative conceptions of the new normal. Finally, I conclude with a call for more research on the subtleties of authoritarian rule using this framework.

## **Transformation and Information**

While continuities certainly exist between CCP rule under Mao and after his death, Chinese politics was fundamentally altered. Scholars and students of contemporary China, as well as the regime itself, have taken to dividing CCP rule of China into two distinct periods, the Mao and Reform Eras.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, cross-national analyses of nondemocratic polities tend to treat the reign in an uninterrupted fashion.<sup>18</sup>

The who, what, where, when, how, and why of Chinese politics changed with profound consequences for citizens living under this regime and its agents at local levels from 1976 to 1981. Technocrats replaced revolutionaries (who), to pursue economic development rather than communist utopia (what), retreating from the front lines of economic production (where), while learning from the disasters of the Great

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<sup>16</sup> See (P. C. C. Huang, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> C.f. (Heilmann & Perry, 2011)

<sup>18</sup> As noted above, analyses that rely solely on typologies of authoritarian regimes have trouble distinguishing between these periods, e.g. (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2014; Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013)). Similarly, Polity and other continuous measures of democracy do not show a break at this time in China.

Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution (when), using market mechanisms (how), to maintain the institutional power of the Chinese Communist Party (why).<sup>19</sup>

It is well understood that central political control of the day-to-day lives of Chinese declined after Mao.<sup>20</sup> However, information's critical role in Reform Era politics tends to be overlooked in favor of depersonalization of elite power, experimentation, adaptation, and pragmatism when considering policy, rhetoric, and state-society relations. While each of these lenses shed some light on different aspects of the three and a half decades that have followed in Mao's wake, in the early reform era decisions about central monitoring of local governments—that is, information—can clarify the problems that the regime faced at the time, how their choices resolved these issues in the short term, and how they came to induce new problems over the long term.<sup>21</sup>

The transformation of Chinese politics following Mao was not simply replacing one paramount leader with another ruler possessing different policy priorities. Rather, the entire machinery of the Chinese Communist Party and the government of the People's Republic of China was reinstitutionalized. Most party members and state officials were distant from the machinations of the super-elite. However, they keenly experienced the policy and rhetorical shifts, moving away from Maoist economic and ideological dogmatism. Leaders at all levels felt cognitive dissonance with the regime's changing justification strategy. Crucially, central elites emphasized bottom-up experimentation with minimal oversight for two reasons. First, they believed that such local initiatives were more likely to produce solid economic outcomes and second, to give local officials opportunities to move beyond the past at their own pace.

The costs and risks of this reform are many. As de Tocqueville put it, "the most critical moment for bad governments is the one which witnesses their first steps towards reform."<sup>22</sup> An existing government initiating a reform signals a belief that the status quo can be improved. As the regime prior to initiating the reform was the likely source or defender of this status quo, reforms signal that the regime had been previously wrong. Such signals can split regime elites as well as create resistance and

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<sup>19</sup> See Wallace, n.d., Chapter 3 for more detail on these changes.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. (Fewsmith, 1994; Lieberthal, 2004; Naughton, 2007)

<sup>21</sup> Another interpretation, following Bunce 1999, could treat the limited vision as a "subversive institution" rather than a known tradeoff between short-run gains and long-term costs. One could argue that it is the success of the ideological transformation itself that undermines the regime that put it in place. Evidence that at least some of the individuals making and implementing these choices raised the specter of troubles down the line point against a view that such potential consequences were unforeseen as well as unintended.

<sup>22</sup> (Tocqueville, 1856, p. 214). This book was mentioned by top leaders (Li Keqiang and Wang Qishan) in 2012 with the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (C. Huang, 2013a).

cognitive dissonance among the regimes agents and the population, especially one emerging out of a totalitarian regime that demanded ideological conformity.

Jettisoning Mao era politics created significant obstacles, as can be seen in difficulties facing rural reforms. Introduction of the profit motive as a regime-approved technique of generating development represented a radical shock to the intellectual frameworks, self-conceptions, and policy environments of cadres and Chinese citizens. Some cadres feared that the rural reforms, by distancing policy from Maoist ideals, would increase inequality as well as possibly lead to the return of landlords.<sup>23</sup> They had come to accept the values that the regime had been using to justify itself and were not willing to shift away from them to others so hastily. Relatedly, those who believed in the prior ideological vision might have concerns not only about the values inherent in the reform but also because of their beliefs about what kinds of policies would produce strong outcomes.<sup>24</sup> Others resisted out of fear, because they were unwilling or too cautious to move so far down what looked like a capitalist road.<sup>25</sup> Under Mao, sudden policy reversals away from profit-minded activities—perhaps most clearly with the post-Great Leap Forward policies and campaigns such as the Socialist Education Movement and the Four Cleanups—scared many from such actions. Others resisted or dragged their feet since the household responsibility system and marketization more generally shifted the power structure in the countryside.

Decollectivization of agriculture also cut off revenue streams to local leaders, who—particularly at the village level—went from ordering all economic and political efforts of the collective to overseeing a community.<sup>26</sup> While their control over the agricultural work of the village was declining, local officials latched onto a new opportunity and fostered an explosion of rural industry.<sup>27</sup> Some officials took advantage of their positions and extracted value out of these enterprises for personal gain, while others facilitated the development of these enterprises in a less corrupt manner. The lack of

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<sup>23</sup> (Zweig, 1983)

<sup>24</sup> That is, ideological beliefs could create resistance through values or efficacy concerns.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, (Zweig, 1983, 1986). Central elites also waffled on these and other successive moments, with periods of openness almost inevitably paired with closed periods (alternating between *fang* 放 and *shou* 收).

<sup>26</sup> (Nee, 1989). Nee argued that the power of local officials would ebb as market incentives shifted power to producers but was sanguine on officials' acquiescence to this eventuality.

<sup>27</sup> A serious debate has emerged on the nature of the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) that were critical to rural industrial growth in China during the 1980s, with Oi and Naughton presenting the standard view—particularly Oi's "local state corporatism"—contrasting with Huang's view of TVEs as overwhelmingly private rather than owned and operated by local states. See (Y. Huang, 2008; Naughton, 2007; Oi, 1999). While Huang is correct in noting that private TVEs account for most of the increase in their number, the change in TVE employment comes from both private and local state-owned firms.

monitoring from higher levels gave local governments significant room to maneuver in ways that greased the wheels of marketization, as officials accepted the tradeoff of less influence over a larger set of resources.<sup>28</sup>

Party-state elites were aware that relaxing central controls would entail an increased risk of profiteering and corruption, as demonstrated by simultaneously recreating monitoring institutions while limiting their ability to monitor. The Party reconstituted the CCDI in 1979 as an investigatory and monitoring agency looking at the political performance of cadres.<sup>29</sup> Multiple economic agencies were also tasked with overseeing the activities of the party-state's local agents: the state planning commission, the state statistical bureau, and the General Accounting Administration (GAA).<sup>30</sup> At the founding of the GAA in 1983, Tian Jiyun, then Vice Premier, explicitly acknowledged the increased economic freedom of localities would generate divergences between national and local interests.<sup>31</sup> The center acted to encourage growth and accepted that its plans to do so would create divides between the desires of central and local officials, yet limited its ability to monitor and punish local actions that moved away from central aims.

These monitoring institutions failed to serve as strong checks on local behavior because of their bureaucratic weakness and lack of capacity. One crucial factor was their subordinate relationship with local party committees. That is, these agencies were tasked to monitor and report to higher authorities about the actions of their immediate political superiors who often controlled their budgets. Secondly, they were given staffs inadequate to observe closely local actions. In 1988, Qiao Shi, a Politburo Standing Committee member and leader of the CDIC at the time, told auditors that since they were responsible for overseeing 800,000 organizations, even a staff of 500,000 would be inadequate; yet rather than suggesting funding a staff of scale up to the task, he emphasized the importance of aiding "internal auditing bureaus" inside of these organizations.<sup>32</sup> State leaders acknowledged this problem yet fashioned these institutions in this short-handed manner, pointing toward a deliberate decision to create a monitoring apparatus with limited vision. To be sure, other institutional channels, such as petitions, existed in China during this period, but the emphasis here is that

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<sup>28</sup> It is obviously not simply exploitive corruption but real development (often with officials taking the lead and personally profiting while benefitting their localities) that took place (Oi, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> (Guo, 2014; Y. Huang, 1996). The CCDI (aka CDIC) state-side institution is the Ministry of Supervision (监察部) that was formed in 1987 (Y. Huang, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> From (Y. Huang, 1996). These organizations are now the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) (中央法改委), the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and the National Audit Office (NAO).

<sup>31</sup> Tian 1983 in (Cui & Shao, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Qiao Shi 1988 in (Cui & Shao, 1990).

these information gathering institutions were limited in their funding and empowerment.<sup>33</sup>

The limited vision into localities meant that local officials were judged primarily off their performance on a few critical quantitative indicators. The Cadre Evaluation System (干部考核制度) is a system of quantitative metrics or targets by which higher-ups can measure local economic and political performance, and reward (or punish) officials based upon such figures.<sup>34</sup> Different targets are seen as more or less critical, hard and soft targets respectively, as well as particular items of singular import—one-item vetoes—which historically have included population growth (via birth rate rather than in-migration, a one-child policy issue) and social stability (with eruptions of instability torpedoing promotions).<sup>35</sup> Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its growth became the most visible and significant of these statistics, with fiscal revenues and investment also weighted heavily.

Under technocratic rule, local government or party-state officials were embedded in a competition over figures in spreadsheets. Simplifying the complexities of local performance made localities legible to the center but came with numerous consequences, some of which were quite perverse.<sup>36</sup> This system in some ways insulated the center from the raw heat of the aggrieved, channeling discontent into “rightful resistance,” which blamed local officials for problems and called on higher levels to ride to the rescue.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars debate about the extent to which numbers cause promotions (and which numbers matter<sup>38</sup>), or to put it differently, the extent to which the figures that fed into the cadre evaluation system dominated the patterns of promotions inside the party-state hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> However, even those who see non-numerical components of a given politician’s profile (i.e. factions or networks) as critical to promotions concede that these numbers do aid in accounting for who moves up the chain of command, especially at the lower levels.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See (Dimitrov, 2014) on petitions. While political authority in China may have been fragmented throughout CCP rule, it certainly became more fragmented following Mao’s death (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> E.g., (Birney, 2014; Edin, 2003; C. F. Minzner, 2009; A. Wang, 2013; Whiting, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> E.g., (Ong, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> On legibility, see (Scott, 1998). For examples of local machinations in China, see (Smith, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> (L. Li & O’Brien, 1996; O’Brien & Li, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> (Lü & Landry, 2012)

<sup>39</sup> E.g., (Edin, 2003; Landry, 2008; Lü & Landry, 2012; V. Shih, Adolph, & Liu, 2012; Whiting, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> One prominent example is (V. Shih et al., 2012).

## Hiding Facts

The significance of a few particular indicators and the general lack of monitoring created incentives for lower level officials to hide the truth from their superiors.<sup>41</sup> Facts that could have exposed problems of environmental pollution, wasted investments, corruption, and manipulated statistics were instead concealed. Rather than accurate records of reality, the numbers at the heart of the machine increasingly failed to count what mattered and what was counted failed to measure up.

Local governments and firms measured on outputs like GDP and profits ignored pollution produced by their activities. A classic negative externality, the system did not count or weight the costs imposed on others by the burning, spilling, and dumping of these toxins. Fossil fuels powered China's run of remarkable economic growth, leading to China becoming the world's number one contributor to global greenhouse emissions in 2006<sup>42</sup> but also contributed to lower air quality to such an extent that estimates of annual excess deaths due to air pollution vary from the tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands.<sup>43</sup> "Airpocalypses" – air so thick with particulate matter that day becomes night – have displaced gleaming skyscrapers as the images dominating international coverage of China's cities.<sup>44</sup> Since 2008, the US embassy in Beijing released hourly PM 2.5 measures on Twitter that showed much higher numbers than the government's official statistics but which better accorded with the experience of those trying to breathe while getting around in Beijing.<sup>45</sup> Air pollution is the most visible, but water and soil pollution also harm the health of people and the agricultural productivity of Chinese land.<sup>46</sup>

Government use of land to support local efforts in contravention to central priorities has become another source of local officials hiding facts from Beijing. The most spectacular example here is the phenomena of "ghost cities," as one piece describes them, "monumentally scaled urban developments, even entire new cities featuring skyscrapers and enormous public spaces, all built at breakneck pace but with scant population."<sup>47</sup> Chinese property market dynamics including local government capture

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<sup>41</sup> Along typical principal-agent problem lines. See, for instance, (Miller, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> ("China overtakes U.S. in greenhouse gas emissions," 2007; US EPA, n.d.)

<sup>43</sup> (Bank, 2007; Wong, 2013). The Chinese government has on occasion pressured international organizations to refrain from releasing quantitative estimates of deaths from air pollution as well (Wong 2013).

<sup>44</sup> E.g. (Hauser, 2015; M. Li, 2013; Wong, 2014)

<sup>45</sup> (Andrews, 2013; Demick, 2011). @BeijingAir is the Twitter handle. Historical data available from US Dept. of State. ("U.S. Department of State Air Quality Monitoring Program," n.d.).

<sup>46</sup> (Hornby, 2014; Larson, 2014; Zuo, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> (Woodworth & Wallace, 2017). See also (Shepard, 2015; Sorace & Hurst, 2015).

of urban land revenues and real estate speculation have led to significant building ahead of demand for housing in many cities with “ghosts” only the most extreme of a widespread phenomenon. From the central government’s perspective, the concern is massive overinvestment that turns out to be uneconomical. Local government plans for the real estate sector certainly indicate that this concern is real, as reports in 2016 suggested that plans combining across China’s cities totaled enough housing units for 3.4 billion people—more than twice China’s likely maximum total population in 2050.<sup>48</sup>

Hard data on the extent of corruption is difficult to observe. Corruption preceded economic reforms, but its scale grew with the rise of markets and especially in the wake of the revival of market reform generated by Deng’s Southern Tour.<sup>49</sup> However, putting numbers to these claims is complex, as different metrics proliferate, none of them particularly satisfying.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of the impossibility of knowing the size of corruption perfectly, some cases show the massive scale that it has taken on in contemporary China. For example, Lt. General Gu Junshan’s mansion in Puyang, Henan took twenty police officers two nights to empty, filling four trucks with gold, high-end liquors, and other valuables.<sup>51</sup> In a separate real estate deal in Shanghai, he reportedly took 6% of a 2 billion yuan land sale (over \$20 million).<sup>52</sup>

The center’s limited vision allowed for graft but also gave incentives for locals to adjust the statistics that ostensibly measure their performance. Trusting numbers comes with difficulty for Chinese leaders concerned about the possibility of data manipulation. As Zhu Rongji stated about grain production estimates,

I don’t entirely believe that figure for grain production, the people at the State Statistical Bureau say they calculated it using the most advanced techniques in the world. I said I recognized that and can’t deny the achievements of the statistical departments. I fully stand by their work, but this sort of thing is hard to verify.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> (“Chinese Cities’ Expansion Plans Could House 3.4 Billion People,” 2016; Zhuang, 2016)

<sup>49</sup> (A. Wedeman, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Wedeman 2012 alone presents the following: revealed rate of corruption, actual rate of corruption, cumulative level of corruption, emerging rate of corruption, perceived level of corruption, incidence vs. intensity of corruption. With observed quantities giving information that helps point towards the hidden reality. Others have looked at different kinds of business expenses from annual reports to extract estimates of corruption and variation over space (e.g. (Y. Wang, 2014)).

<sup>51</sup> (H. Wang, 2014; W. Zhou & Wang, 2015)

<sup>52</sup> (Meng, 2014)

<sup>53</sup> (Zhu, 2013, p. 348)

The quality of the quantitative data of things less tangible than grain are even more concerning. In a report released by Wikileaks, then executive vice premier Li Keqiang noted his skepticism of official GDP figures from lower level governments as “man-made,” “unreliable,” and “for reference only.”<sup>54</sup> Systematic evaluation of GDP growth measures at the provincial level also points towards officials “joking the stats,” as growth in GDP exceeds growth rates in other close correlates at moments of political significance such as turnovers.<sup>55</sup> Air quality statistics have also come under scrutiny as discrepancies between official and unofficial measurements come to light and photographs reveal that “blue sky days” fail to require a sky resembling the color blue.<sup>56</sup> In light of these and other problems such as slowing of economic growth, the regime has taken a neopolitical turn, especially since 2012.

## From Technocratic to Neopolitical

The regime has shifted its mix of political strategies and itself has joined commentators declaring a “new normal (新常态),” yet in some ways the new system may not look so different at first glance. What are we to make of these changes? Obviously views differ on this point, from those emphasizing continuity, such as (Lardy, 2014; Shen, 2014), to those emphasizing differences, such as (C. Minzner, 2014, 2015a). I take a middle position that acknowledges the real changes that have taken place but affixing them as within the broader stream of the Reform Era’s emphasis on performance. The core changes are an institutionalized centralization of political authority as seen through greater vision into local governance and changes in how the regime justifies itself to various audiences. I lay out these below.

The first change has been a substantial centralization of power.<sup>57</sup> The centralization’s most important and noted component is the increased activity and prominence of the Party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).<sup>58</sup> While the CCDI operated prior to this period, its efforts were not as pervasive, feared, or commented upon as under Wang Qishan during the anti-corruption “campaign,” which has also targeted more and higher-level officials than previous efforts in the reform era.<sup>59</sup> These

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<sup>54</sup> Wikileaks, Cable 07BEIJING1760, 15 March 2007

<sup>55</sup> (Wallace, 2016). For evidence of village-level officials manipulating statistics, see (Tsai, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, (Andrews, 2013; Demick, 2011). For academic work, see (Oliver, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Whether there has been centralization within the Politburo Standing Committee, as some argue and others question, remains to be seen. Although the extent to which outsiders will ever know the “truth” of such dynamics is limited at best. On difficulties of assessing elite politics in China, see (Teiwes, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> Sometimes abbreviated as CDIC.

<sup>59</sup> “Campaign” is placed in quotes as it seems to be something of more permanence—something institutionalized—rather than a temporary campaign; the term “crusade” is also used. Higher level targets include Zhou Yongkang, former Politburo Standing Committee member and Xu Caihou, former

anti-corruption activities represent a centralization of power because they expand the auditing of local governments, officials, bureaucrats, and firms by central authorities to a greater extent and with more independence than previously occurred. The CCDI has opened new offices at local levels and its place in the political hierarchy in localities has increased by making its leaders responsible to central authorities instead of only to the local party committee.<sup>60</sup> The party's principal actors in Beijing are increasing their monitoring activities over their agents in the provinces, cities, and counties of China.

The centralization of authority even can be seen in policy dimensions that at first appear relatively distant from organizational issues of the party-state, such as urbanization policy. The CCP-led regime has managed urbanization throughout its reign, promoting urban stability and attempting to restrict migration to and the size of the country's largest cities.<sup>61</sup> However, in recent years, there has been a push in the opposite direction, towards building true megacities in and around Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Yet this push appears to be more related to the desire for increased central control—assaulting the “fortress economies” of the different regions—than purely about urban planning.<sup>62</sup> As Zhang Gui, a researcher at Hebei Technology University put it, “Right now, every official will think of his own region first – from the construction of projects to investment,” since heretofore officials had been judged primarily on such metrics.<sup>63</sup>

A second change can be seen in the increased importance of party over state organs, exemplifying the rise of the political over the technocratic. The CCDI's increased role as the principal actor of centralization is particularly fascinating because it is a party rather than a state organ, making the prospect of a rule of law that constrains the CCP even more unlikely in the near term. A related phenomenon can be seen in the expansion of leadership small groups. The 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2014 pointed towards the heightened position of the party and the center's efforts to monitor and control local officials through the legal system. The official communique from the plenum called for concrete steps that should allow judges to hold local officials more

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Politburo member and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (Barreda & Yan, 2014; Caixin, 2014; “Zhou Yongkang's Downfall,” 2014).

<sup>60</sup> (D. Zhou, 2014).

<sup>61</sup> For more on China's management of urbanization, see (Wallace, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> (Reuters, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> (Reuters, 2014). The piece goes on to argue: “They [experts] say China's “every region for itself” approach to economic growth is a cause of a wide variety of problems, including overinvestment, pollution and corruption.” Others have also noted that urbanization and metropolitan planning has become a battlefield for inter-level conflict in some provinces, as each attempts to claim turf (Jaros 2014).

accountable for their actions.<sup>64</sup> In particular, the creation of circuit courts and regional courts with jurisdictions across extant subnational borders should give judges room to rule against local leaders without putting the court's resources and their own salaries at risk. That is, while the reform of the legal system and other state institutions fits with the centralizing thread of the politicized new normal, the CCDI and reinvigoration of party institutions reflects a break from the practices of the past thirty years of reform.

The post-2012 neopolitical turn also differs from before in the regime's new public and explicit calls to justify its rule on traditional morality.<sup>65</sup> Earlier in the reform era, such an emphasis was placed on technical expertise that the Politburo Standing Committee formed in 1997 was completely made up of individuals that held degrees in science or engineering.<sup>66</sup> These years of peak technocracy clearly marked the successful rise of China's "Red Engineers."<sup>67</sup> During this period, the political base of the regime shifted from urban industrial workers to include capitalists and intellectuals.<sup>68</sup> These two populations that had been targets of political campaigns under Mao became crucial to the Party which now represented them, incorporating these potentially threatening groups before any trouble arose.<sup>69</sup> The idea that politics could be reduced to a series of engineering problems has been upended in the new normal.

The Mass Line (群众路线) campaign represents an example of this neopolitical turn. The goal of Xi's campaign—and his personal image has been closely tied to it<sup>70</sup>—is to rectify "four undesirable work styles" of Chinese local officials: "formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance."<sup>71</sup> High provincial officials, as well as those of lower ranks, ate and lived in the homes of local residents to increase their connections with the lives of those in their jurisdictions.<sup>72</sup> They also engaged in self-

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<sup>64</sup> ("Official Central Committee Communiqué on 4th Plenum," 2014). Members of the CCDI standing committee attended the 4<sup>th</sup> plenum as non-voting delegates.

<sup>65</sup> Mixing Maoist and Imperial (principally Confucian but also Legalist) ideals of behavior is fascinating since so much of Mao's thought went in to criticizing the problems associated with the old society's Confucianism and the inequality that it perpetuated and justified. Their fusion appears on its way to becoming an "invented tradition" (Ranger & Hobsbawm, 1983).

<sup>66</sup> "The clout of technocrats reached a pinnacle in 1997, when all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee formed that year had degrees in the sciences or engineering." (R. Li, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> (Andreas, 2009)

<sup>68</sup> (Solinger, 2003; Yang, 2006)

<sup>69</sup> (Dickson, 2003; Tiewes, 1997). "Incorporating" here is used instead of the more common "coopting" because the latter implies a level of opprobrium and perhaps permanent neutralization.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, (Xinhua, 2014a). Interestingly, some argue that the style and operations of Xi's mass line campaign are actually following Bo Xilai's mass line program in Chongqing before he was toppled (Downie, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> (Xinhua, 2014b).

<sup>72</sup> (Xinhua Insight, 2013).

criticisms that were broadcast on national television, such as Zhou Benshun's statement about the weakness of quantitative metrics of development mentioned in the introduction.<sup>73</sup> Public discussion of the political failings of leaders who remain in office was much less common during the Reform Era's first three decades.

Fighting hedonism and extravagance has become a major point in these changes; the imposed austerity of governmental officials is referred to by the expression "four dishes, one soup" after a simple meal that Xi ate in Hebei's Fuping county.<sup>74</sup> This simple meal differs greatly from the elaborate banquets for officials of local governments, paid for either out of public coffers or by local business leaders and developers to influence policy decisions.

Emphasizing the necessity of local officials to be judged by their morality fits into the centralization efforts as it can inculcate obedience to central dictates and perhaps reduce monitoring costs. It also represents a partial move away from technocratic or scientific measures of performance as a technology of legitimation towards traditionalism, as can be seen in Xi Jinping's calls to Chinese classics in defining virtue.<sup>75</sup> The change in the regime's public-facing justification is significant as it reframes the discourse to emphasizing virtue and process over the output-centric rhetoric via performance legitimacy arising from litanies repeating the rapid growth of GDP and other statistics associated with scientific development.

Interestingly, explicit references in the campaign are made to the idea that such changes are not singular or temporary. Xi himself is quoted telling officials that they "should not have the wrong idea that they have passed the test just because the sessions are over."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, in August 2014, fourteen months after the launch of the campaign, the regime promulgated further details about reinvigorating the implementation of anti-corruption measures.<sup>77</sup> Two years later, new cases of officials—high and low—continue to dominate the headlines.<sup>78</sup>

While much of the transformation in the new normal exists inside the party-state hierarchy, the neopolitical turn can also be seen in acts of repression against those taken to be opponents of the regime. Rights lawyers, feminist activists, and Hong Kong booksellers exemplify this return to more aggressive treatment for those outsiders

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<sup>73</sup> ("Critical masses," 2013)

<sup>74</sup> ("Four dishes and one soup," 2013). Also ("Xi Eats Plainly Amid Focus on Official Waistlines," 2012).

<sup>75</sup> E.g. (D. Tatlow, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> (Xinhua Insight, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> (Xinhua, 2014b).

<sup>78</sup> TJ interim party secretary. September 2016.

trying to push agendas. Over a hundred and forty rights lawyers were detained in a sweep in July 2015.<sup>79</sup> Five leading feminist activists were detained earlier in 2015—the night of March 6<sup>th</sup> before International Women’s Day (March 8<sup>th</sup>)—and were brutally interrogated while in captivity despite their cause going viral on international social media.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps the most sensational examples of China’s neopolitical repression have been its use of televised confessions, notably in its efforts against booksellers from Hong Kong.<sup>81</sup> In 2013, highly successful corporate executives and public intellectuals appearing on CCTV to confess their crimes returned to Chinese politics something that had been nearly absent for the prior decades of the Reform Era. These humiliation rituals then expanded to include a number of booksellers from Hong Kong, including one who vanished while traveling in Thailand.<sup>82</sup> Rather than imposing costs on activists or opponents silently or generating self-censoring actions through perceptions of fear, these displays blast messages of state power, authority, and willingness to attack those deemed critical. Displays of bald repression broadcast for all to see signal a

The changes between the prior more technocratic and current neopolitical turn are numerous and significant. Institutionalized authority has been centralized through the expansion and increased prominence of the CCDI. The elite bargain that seemed to protect officials of high rank from investigation has been shaken up. The system of assessments for local officials has been changed. Political discussions, including self-criticisms, have been broadcast on various Chinese media. Both Maoism and classical Chinese political rhetoric and ideology have returned with both portrayed positively as a way of judging officials and the regime as a whole.<sup>83</sup>

## **Alternative Conceptions of the Neopolitical Turn**

The argument proposed here separates the Reform Era into a period of previous technocratic politics and the current neopolitical turn, providing context for understanding the variety of changes in internal power dynamics and state rhetoric in China over the past few years. Other interpretations and alternatives have been offered. I briefly discuss some of these as well as evidence that could aid in distinguishing opposing observable implications.

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<sup>79</sup> (Amnesty International, 2015; Buckley, 2015; “China’s ‘Rule by Law’ Takes an Ugly Turn,” 2015). See also (“China Focus: China apprehends suspected paid protest organizers,” 2015, “China Focus: Detention of ‘trouble-making’ lawyers in accordance with law: legal experts - People’s Daily Online,” n.d.).

<sup>80</sup> (Fincher, 2016; D. K. Tatlow, 2016; Zeng, 2015)

<sup>81</sup> (Goldkorn et al., 2016; Yoon, 2015)

<sup>82</sup> (Forsythe & Jacobs, 2016; “Hong Kong Bookseller Who Vanished in Thailand Held in China,” 2016).

<sup>83</sup> Minzner 2014 also references the closing off of foreign influences or connections.

A first alternative to my argument discounts the changes and puts forward simply that there has not been a political transition. The anti-corruption crusade is of a piece with prior purges, part of the regular politics of new leaders being installed in China's increasingly institutionalized Reform Era. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both initiated similar attacks on corruption and calls for probity that conveniently sidelined potential elite rivals.<sup>84</sup> However, Xi's various campaigns have led to more investigations and the removal of more, higher level officials than previous iterations. Politburo and former Politburo Standing Committee members (Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang) have been pushed out of the party, as has a leading military figure (Xu Caihou).<sup>85</sup> Xi's anti-corruption campaign is distinct from those of his Reform Era predecessors because of its long duration, serious intensity, and willingness to pursue higher level officials. All of these indicate a new political direction, confrontational rather than bloodless.

A related account acknowledges changes but argues that the Reform Era is best understood as a series of centralizing and decentralizing cycles with the current moment an example of the former. For example, in *Factions and Finance*, Shih argues that decentralization and centralization of banking and financial operations moved in cycles.<sup>86</sup> A generalist faction, led by Deng, Hu, and Zhao, pushed to devolve investment decisions to localities where their allies/experience laid, while what he terms a technocratic faction, led by Chen Yun, attempted to walk back these changes and have central authorities control the financial levers. Turning to the recent period, however, the centralizing changes under Xi are principally political rather than economic and appear less likely to be reversed. That is, while these changes undoubtedly have economic consequences and perhaps even economic causes, the mechanisms of centralization are primarily political and institutional. The CCDI's expansion and its ascent up the local party hierarchy increase the power of the center's monitors in the localities. The Reform Era has seen episodes of significant economic centralization, such as the 1994 Fiscal Reforms, but political centralization has been significantly rarer. The long duration of the anti-corruption crusade also distinguishes this effort from those in prior cycles.

As Xi's anti-corruption crusade persists, claims that today's politics are the same as yesterday's are increasingly being replaced by arguments that we have entered a third era of Chinese politics. The most direct and persuasive case is made by Minzner.<sup>87</sup> He credits "institutionalization" with keeping China stable during the Reform Era and focuses on a number of norms that had been solidifying which now appear to be

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<sup>84</sup> (A. Wedeman, 2005, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> (Barreda & Yan, 2014; Caixin, 2014; "Zhou Yongkang's Downfall," 2014)

<sup>86</sup> (V. C. Shih, 2009)

<sup>87</sup> (C. Minzner, 2015a, 2015b)

eroding away. Succession politics bounded by age limits forcing turnover, the rise of a meritocratic bureaucracy, the decline of purges based on factional connections, and an increased willingness to engage with the outside world and foreign ideas provided the core content of the Reform Era's institutionalization.<sup>88</sup> Since the start of the new millennium and especially after Xi has come to power, these policies, beliefs, and patterns of behavior, among others, are shifting.

Distinguishing between this "new era" perspective and the "neopolitical turn" formulation presented here is subtle but important. A chasm divides Chinese politics in 2017 and 1967. The personalization of power, the engagement of the military in politics, the use of legal mechanisms to govern, and the use of markets and prices to allocate goods rather than centralized economic plans are all radically different across that fifty year span, but today's situation remains similar to that of China two or three decades ago. The changes taking place are not as dramatic as those separating the Mao and Reform eras. Beijing is not throwing out the rulebook; it is simply changing some of the rules. As argued above, the most critical of these shifts is that of centralization. Those seeing Xi as grabbing power tend to view this centralization as personalization, whereas I tend to see it as an institutionalized shift to increased monitoring of local agents by the regime's center. In the end, China today and two decades ago seems to be ruled by similar groups of elites through similar mechanisms pursuing similar, although modified, ends. Clarification about what is happening can arise from attempting to ascertain the reasons for these changes.

Why has this neopolitical turn emerged in the PRC under Xi Jinping? I argue that the new normal represents both an attempt to fix technocratic pathologies as well as to hedge against the possibility of an end to strong economic performance by the constructing of an alternative narrative to justify the regime based on Chinese tradition and moral uprightness.<sup>89</sup> The center is increasing its monitoring to better understand the situation in the provinces and control the behavior of local government officials. The utility of the prior technocratic, decentralized, and low information politics has become overwhelmed by its accumulated costs, particularly economic and political risks.<sup>90</sup> For instance, the incentives led to over-production of particular goods and under-production of others as local officials gamed the system; for example, during different

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<sup>88</sup> (C. Minzner, 2015a, 2015b)

<sup>89</sup> Thanks to Ben Lessing for pushing me to clarify on this point. For similar arguments related to the economic costs of China's existing bureaucratic system, see (P. C. C. Huang, 2015, p. 267).

<sup>90</sup> To clarify, the center operated with limited information about localities during technocratic dominance; that is, the center judged local performance on a few key metrics rather than with more sustained attention or multi-dimensional assessments.

periods local governments had tariff fights that fell into violence, and environmental protection was under-supplied throughout.<sup>91</sup>

As China moved from severely under-capitalized to possessing greater stocks of extant investment, the most valuable projects tended to be completed first. This left projects that had been delayed for years increasingly made little economic sense.<sup>92</sup> Even economists sanguine about China's growth prospects, such as Nicholas Lardy, acknowledge overinvestment.<sup>93</sup> Doomsayers, on the other hand, point to the rise of ghost cities and airports built years ahead of anticipated demand as uneconomical.<sup>94</sup>

China's reliance on investment and exports for growth has long been noted and calls for it to rebalance to a more consumption-based model of economic development have been heard for years.<sup>95</sup> Cross-national evidence points to economic growth's significance for explaining authoritarian regime survival.<sup>96</sup> Far from destabilizing authoritarian regimes, periods of economic growth tend to foster political stability.<sup>97</sup> Yet the repeated interventions of the Chinese regime in its economy to mitigate potential hard times point to the regime's concerns about the politics of an economic downturn.

The new reality facing local officials appears more complicated. Having accepted scientific measurement of performance into the system's DNA, it is hard to remove, even with the various pathologies already discussed. Rather than ceasing to use quantitative measures, the system is moving in two directions. First is a move to diversify the number of different measures used to evaluate officials.<sup>98</sup> In September, the National Bureau of Statistics released a list of forty indicators that would help to

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<sup>91</sup> See, for example, (A. H. Wedeman, 2003) on various commodity fights and local protectionism during price reform from the 1980s through mid-1990s. See, for example, (A. Wang, 2006, 2013) on environmental degradation as a result of the incentives emerging from the CES.

<sup>92</sup> Similarly with state planning, expectations of the economic viability of different concerns decreases over time as China's labor costs increase.

<sup>93</sup> Lardy, China Town Hall, October 2014.

<sup>94</sup> E.g. Pettis, Shih, etc. For example, the heavily covered disaster of Ordos, (Sanderson, 2013; Woodworth, 2012, 2015; X. Zhou, 2013). On the phenomenon of ghost cities more generally, see ("China's Ghost Cities Are About to Get Spookier," 2014; Sorace & Hurst, 2015; Woodworth & Ulfstjerne, n.d.). Symbolically, ghost cities are the polar opposites of slums. They demonstrate a capacity and willingness to invest in infrastructure rather than allow individuals to exist without state penetration. However, the emptiness shows waste and problems of decision-making akin to that of slums.

<sup>95</sup> E.g., (Eurasia Group, 2011). In 2007, Wen Jiabao made similar comments (IMF Survey, 2007; Wen, 2007).

<sup>96</sup> (Cheibub et al., 2010; Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999; Wallace, 2013, 2016; Wright, 2008).

<sup>97</sup> (Cheibub et al., 2010; Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999; Wallace, 2013, 2016; Wright, 2008).

<sup>98</sup> (Wildau, 2014)

end the reign of “GDP Supremacy.”<sup>99</sup> Second is the emphasis on morality and the increased presence of monitoring. Anti-corruption teams going into top organizations, corporations, and local governments and prosecuting individuals for failing to uphold high standards have become routine. Some officials have postponed decisions in the hopes that this unwanted attention is simply a phase that they can wait out, but the institutionalization of this monitoring makes waiting unlikely to be successful.

At its most expansive, the political elements of the new normal could be seen as a move away from quantification and scientism towards a governance by process rather than rule. That is, in moving away from the limited vision into localities focusing on just a few quantified metrics, the Chinese regime is not simply changing the metrics that it uses or even just adding a few additional metrics to the list on a cadre's annual evaluation form, rather it could be interpreted as a shift away from metric and rule based governance altogether. If not rules, then what? Process-based governance, where the proper authorities will judge whether lower level officials acted in a proper manner given the local circumstances. While such evaluations are likely to suffer in transparency terms (and thus be able to hide transgressions of favored agents or attack enemies even if they have not transgressed), in accountability terms this process-based evaluation might be able to incorporate a wider breadth of participation and feedback from the citizenry below as well as give latitude to higher levels to impose their wishes on lower levels.

## Conclusion

The principal claim of the paper is that China's Reform Era is undergoing an important neopolitical turn. The changes centralize political authority, increase standards of behavior on local officials, extend the institutional capacities of extant inspection units, and promulgate new norms of behavior. These changes are not so extensive to declare the beginning of a new era in Chinese politics, nor do they undermine the significance of the post-Mao transformation into China's Reform Era.

More broadly, the discussion of China's neopolitical turn can help illuminate areas of nondemocratic politics that the existing literature has overlooked. Political science has made substantial progress differentiating the end of authoritarianism in a country and the end of a given authoritarian regime's rule in a country. This distinction captures the reality that most authoritarian regimes are replaced not by democracies but by other dictators, giving us insights into the political risks that these regimes face and concerns

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<sup>99</sup> (Xinhua, 2014c). That being said, the regime has referred to moving away from GDP on a number of previous occasions. In 2015, Shanghai became the first provincial unit to not release a GDP growth target in decades (“GDP apostasy,” 2015; C. Huang, 2015).

that they have. Indeed, these survival patterns have directed researchers to focus on elite politics, since coups predominate as the ultimate mechanism ending one regime and beginning another.<sup>100</sup>

For as much as they can account for the deaths of regimes, elite-focused approaches have difficulty saying much about what life is like under them, beyond broad assessments of growth rates, levels of violence, and foreign policies.<sup>101</sup> Yet regimes vary, and the politics that they inculcate and the policies that they pursue matter for their populations. This is not the whole of their import, however. Mass politics is rarely just up to the whims of the dictator or epiphenomenal to elite politics, but instead mass politics shapes elite politics. In *Cities and Stability*, I show that populations matter in authoritarian regime survival. Even basic differences across countries and regimes such as the size of capital cities and the concentration of urbanization shape survival patterns.<sup>102</sup> And not simply those caused by urban rebellions but also intra-elite coups. Mass politics, or state-society relations as it is often referred to in the literature on Chinese politics, is a crucial factor in authoritarian regimes in both the possibility of revolution but also, and critically, in determining the character of intra-elite politics. In other words, while coups are proximate causes of regime deaths, mass politics is the underlying condition that makes a regime susceptible, makes an ambitious colonel consider such a move, and makes an elite willing to side with the new leader over the old one.

China's neopolitical turn highlights the types of transitions that nondemocratic regimes experience and initiate but remain under-examined in the literature. Rhetorical changes put politics front and center instead of being shunted off to the side. Institutional changes give the center more ability to oversee the activities of lower level officials but also reduces its ability to slough off responsibility to local bad actors for problems or malfeasance. Nondemocratic politics is not transparent, which has pushed scholarly inquiry to focus on easily measurable quantities, such as the personal history of the leader and the presence of legislatures, elections, and parties to differentiate regimes. However, nondemocratic politics is not as opaque as work has suggested, because rhetoric and policy detail exude from even the most closed-off regimes and give insight into the machinations of their politics.

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<sup>100</sup> (Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014; Svobik, 2012; Wahman et al., 2013).

<sup>101</sup> (Blaydes, 2010; Debs & Goemans, 2010; Greitens, 2016; Svobik, 2012; Weeks, 2008; Weiss, 2014; Wright, 2008)

<sup>102</sup> (Wallace, 2013, 2014).

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