

Perception vs. Reality
The State of Politics in China

An Interview with Andrew J. Nathan

Scheduled to take place later this year, China's Nineteenth Party Congress will attract much attention as party leaders maneuver to determine the country's future leadership and direction. In this wide-ranging interview, Andrew J. Nathan, Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, examines varying perceptions of China by offering his thoughts on President Xi Jinping, Chinese public opinion, questions of national unity, and the future of China's foreign policy.

Journal: In your 2003 essay titled "Authoritarian Resilience," you stated that the institutionalization of orderly succession processes, meritocratic promotions, and channels of mass participation explained the resilience of the post-1949 Chinese political apparatus. Has your evaluation of the Chinese authority changed in the past ten years? Do you think the government has become more or less resilient?

Nathan: The concept of resilience that I was talking about in 2003 was more retrospective than prospective. It wasn't a prediction or forecast that the leadership would survive. But it was an analysis of how it had managed to survive after the setback of 1989, and some of those things that helped the Chinese government survive after 1989 are changing. Things are always changing in politics. One of the things that seems to be changing is the institutionalization of succession, which was really the main point of my 2003 article. I said that this kind of governing structure (the Leninist party-state) is normally characterized by power struggles at the top. There is a lack of institutionalized succession procedures, so the leaders are subject to power struggle over succession. However, the Chinese had managed to make these informal rules about the top leaders serving two five-year terms and retiring at a certain age, along with how the outgoing leadership should make a collective choice regarding the incoming leadership and how

that incoming leadership should be chosen from among people who have served a series of posts in the government over the course of some decades and proved themselves in their careers. So it seems to me that, at this point, the Chinese government still has the meritocratic ladder for careers in the party and a system of orderly succession. But now it looks as though the two five-year term rule may go away. We don't know for sure. As Xi Jinping is consolidating more and more power and seems to be damaging the former type of collective leadership, many people speculate he is preparing the ground to serve more than two terms. If that happens, then I think the rules of succession will be uncertain, and it opens the way for a power struggle.

Another feature that I pointed to in the 2003 article was the safety-valve institutions such as village elections and appeal methods (*shangfang*). It seems that, with the authorities cracking down more than before on civil society, this is also becoming a source of possible challenge to Beijing, because the Chinese people won't feel they have a way of articulating their sense of injustice and grievance. So in that sense, I feel that the leadership is changing in ways that may make it more vulnerable to internal splits or to challenges from civil society. So I would say the Chinese government is less resilient, but I don't mean it as a prediction, because I think there are so many complicated factors that are hard to predict.

Journal: Let's talk about President Xi and the changing leadership structure for a moment. In the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held in October 2016, Xi was referred to as the "core" of the leadership, a description that had not been applied to his predecessor Hu Jintao. Does this designation suggest a possible breakaway from the post-Mao era tradition of collective rule in the Chinese central leadership?

Nathan: Xi Jinping has come to power at a time when Beijing faces some very sharp challenges that it has to deal with, including economic adjustments. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been under a continuous process of reform since 1979, and that process of reform has reached a place where there are a bunch of very large SOEs that are not operating as efficiently as private enterprises do. Many other problems remain unsolved. For one, the corruption problem has gotten worse in recent years. The military has to take another step upwards in becoming a contemporary military that is smaller, more high-tech, and able to do combined operations. The middle class is growing and the government needs to continue to make itself acceptable to the middle class. Xi Jinping faces a number of really huge challenges that are difficult to overcome because China is a huge country and the organizations that he needs to confront and reform are gigantic, including the SOEs, the military, and the party-state administrative apparatus. So I think he has consolidated power so that he can force reforms down the throats of these large bureaucracies. I don't think the bureaucracies are opposed to the idea of reform in general. But when they are confronted with the need to make big changes, they resist because they have their own interests, and they worry about disruptions. So Xi needs a lot of power. And that may work if he can make all these reforms happen, but it also bears a huge risk. I think the risk has several aspects. One is that it is extremely difficult for one man to make all of those decisions while

keeping control of all these complicated domains. Another risk is the resentment that is engendered by consolidating so much power—resentment among other leaders who themselves are important and powerful people who are being sidelined. So I think there is a risk of a power struggle breaking out because Xi Jinping is rolling back collective leadership.

Journal: In your article “Who is Xi?” you wrote that “Xi’s government behaves as if it faces an existential threat,” but meanwhile, a number of public opinion polls and surveys have shown that Chinese people’s level of trust in the government is significantly higher than the world average. If the Chinese government enjoys such high level of support from the population, why does it need to exert tighter control on civil society? Is there a perceptual disparity between the level of threat Beijing perceives and the level of threat these public opinion polls suggest? Do these opinion polls accurately reflect the reality of the CCP’s legitimacy when universal suffrage on the national level is absent?

Nathan: This is such a puzzling question. You may know I wrote an article called “The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class”¹ which in part addresses this puzzle with respect to the middle class in particular. We don’t know the answer. Survey research consistently shows a high level of trust especially in central government institutions. However, survey research by nature, especially when you have a questionnaire and you ask people would you agree or disagree on some questions, doesn’t have the capability to probe into the complicated layers that any person’s attitude consists of. So I don’t know the answer. But I speculate that when you ask a person how the government is doing, especially about the central government instead of the local government, people tend to think they are better off because they think that the economy is growing—“my life is better now than it was five years ago, I am making more money, I bought a car, I bought an apartment, or I sent my child to work at a factory and she is sending money home.” Also, the person being surveyed may think, “I read in the newspapers that China is standing up to foreign enemies and I am proud to be Chinese.” So then they say they endorse the government.

However, this attitude is somewhat fragile and the relationship is provisional. When something bad happens, for example when the economy slows down, the person loses a job, encounters some bad consumer products, or the person’s baby gets sick from pollution, or something bad happens in foreign policy such as some clashes in the South China Sea or the East China Sea and the Chinese military doesn’t do well, then there is another layer of attitudes that comes out, as it did in 1989 when people were thinking that life in China was very hard. My point is that people have other attitudes that are critical, and the survey research may not capture these when it asks questions about how the central government is doing. That can easily come out if something goes wrong. This is how I speculate that we can understand this paradox.

¹ Andrew J. Nathan, “The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class,” *Journal of Democracy* (April 2016): 5-19.

I think Xi Jinping perhaps sees it in that way—that the people support the government only provisionally as long as the government is delivering and performing. Xi may not think his people support his government in any deep way, and if the government were to take the lid off and just let every lawyer sue those that they want to sue, let everybody run for office, and let every journalist report critical things about government policies, there could be a quick deflation of the government’s prestige. So the government may feel the need to keep a lid on. Chinese leaders don’t want to show any weakness, because they feel that people will take advantage of that. As I mentioned before, Xi Jinping is trying at the same time to control the SOEs, the military, the party-state apparatus, and the corrupt bureaucrats. I think he has the feeling that these corrupt bureaucrats are all opportunists. Xi may feel that they joined the party because the party was in power but are not really committed to what the party stands for. They just took the easy road. As soon as they perceive the party as weak, they will take advantage. So I think that Xi Jinping wants to crack down on civil society in general because of that fragility or contingency of public support and that fear that if he were to take the lid off, the people and the bureaucrats would defect. There is that belief that the Chinese government does not enjoy a robust or deeply rooted form of public support.

Journal: In your book *China's Search for Security*, which you co-authored with Andrew Scobell, you categorized China's foreign policy environment into “four rings” with the first ring being China’s interior regions that experience the “problem of stateness.” Since the publication of this book, what has changed in Beijing's policy toward its “First Ring,” especially in light of the growing anti-Chinese sentiment amid both Taiwan's 2016 election and Hong Kong's 2014 pro-democracy Occupy Central Movement? Why do we see the surge of anti-Chinese sentiment in both regions?

Nathan: Both of these populations developed distinctive identities throughout history. In the Hong Kong case, I guess I would characterize the identity in 1997 as an identity that said, “Yes, we are Chinese. We are willing to be part of China, and we are culturally Chinese, and we feel pretty okay about being part of a rising China, but at the same time, we have a distinctive local identity that prioritizes things like rule of law, freedom of speech, and cosmopolitan exposure to Western culture.” So there was an optimism in 1997 by most people, although there were some pessimists. I think as time has gone by, Beijing has not given enough respect to that independent identity of the Hong Kong people. But I can understand why, because there are pan-democrats in Hong Kong who want to press forward with democratization of elections. The authorities in Beijing feel that if they are going to democratize the election of the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive, then things are going to potentially get out of control. So Beijing decided to be risk-averse, as they generally do. Beijing basically did not trust the Hong Kong people with the democratic reforms that had been promised in principle in the Basic Law, at least in the way that they were understood by the Hong Kong people. So the simple answer is that Beijing decided not to take the risk of trusting the Hong Kongers, and the Hong Kong people felt like this showed a lack of respect for their identity and that it represented a threatening future where Hong Kong would be treated the same as other parts of China with less rule of law and less freedom than Hong Kong was used to. This has caused the situation to get worse and to polarize.

Not everybody in Hong Kong feels this way, but apparently more and more people feel this way, especially among the young people. So it is going in the wrong direction.

The same logic applies to Taiwan. It basically comes down to a lack of respect by Beijing for local identity, given the reality that the people in Taiwan feel they have their own identity. A lot of people used to feel that they were both Chinese and Taiwanese and that the Taiwanese part of that identity was their globalized identity and part of their global outlook, partly due to the fact that they created the first Chinese democracy. Again, policymakers in Beijing felt that they couldn't trust the Taiwanese people, and again I understand why that is, because the Taiwanese mostly did not want to unify with the PRC. Therefore, Beijing has tried to use all kinds of quasi-coercive methods—not military force, but diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, and the threat of military force—to keep Taiwan from, as they would see it, going off the rails. This computes for people in Taiwan as an insult to them, and it has polarized the situation for probably a majority of Taiwan's population.

Based on this analysis, I believe Beijing has mishandled these two situations. But I understand why they handled it the way they did, otherwise it would have been really risky for Beijing. So, in that sense, you cannot really blame Beijing but rather view the situation as a tragic circumstance from the point of view of everyone involved. And it is not only China. This is a problem that you have all around the world right now. Right now in the United States we're having this problem of voter suppression. In the United States, the Republican Party is afraid to trust the African-American and Hispanic voters and are trying to keep them from turning out in large numbers to cast votes, and that polarizes relations with those populations. It is very hard to find that point of mutual trust among diverse identity groups in any political system.

Journal: Why do Taiwanese, such as the protestors of the Sunflower Movement, see trade with the mainland as disrespectful to their independent identity?

Nathan: You raise a good question: if Beijing is allowing the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), which benefits the Taiwanese economy, why is that disrespectful? I think the Sunflower Movement occurred because a section of the young people in Taiwan felt that Ma Ying-jeou was using the ECFA process to put the Taiwanese economy too much under the control of the mainland. They saw this as political rather than economic, that Beijing and Ma together were cooperating to create more and more integration between the two economies that would restrict the freedom of Taiwan to follow its own path because they would become hostages. I think that was the underlying issue. Of course they viewed the economic relationship within a wider framework of Beijing saying that Taiwan cannot have a choice of independence, Beijing saying that we have a military option, Beijing saying that Taiwan cannot join the World Health Organization as a member—so [the protestors] would put that in the context of all of those actions. If you speak to mainland China experts on Taiwan, they would say look, we are fine with Taiwan choosing any option as long as it is part of China, and we are very open-minded about it. But in Taiwan, it is not perceived in that way. It is perceived as the need to recognize the 1992 consensus. I call it a tragic

circumstance because from the mainland point of view, Beijing is trying to articulate a policy that is as flexible as it can possibly be. But from the Taiwanese point of view, it seems as if the mainland will not allow Taiwan to determine its own fate.

Journal: As you have pointed out in the past, mainland Chinese identity also plays a part as well in these issues. In *China's Search for Security*, you identified Chinese nationalism as a key driver in Beijing's foreign policy. Do you think the Chinese people's nationalism is fueled by the CCP's official narrative of the "century of humiliation" in the Chinese education system, or has it naturally developed in the context of China's growing economic and military might? Can we compare Chinese nationalism with "American exceptionalism?"

Nathan: I think it is fueled by both the century of humiliation and [China's] growing might. Both of these things are disseminated by the Chinese propaganda institutions, but they are sort of opposite sides of the same coin—that is, being proud of the economic and military might because it represents such a change from the century of humiliation. I think that if there were no propaganda about the century of humiliation, that if the government stopped emphasizing it, and if textbooks just told history as it was, it would still be there because it was indeed a century of humiliation. So I think both of these things are there. But I think the more powerful of the two elements is the sense of economic and military might. I think for those seeing Xi Jinping host the G20 conference, or having the Olympics in Beijing, or for a Chinese middle class person to go to New York and to go sight-seeing and buy things on Fifth Avenue, it is great. And I think people are very proud of that, and I agree with them. It is a great thing.

Nationalism is a word that covers a lot of different things. So the kind of pride that I was just describing is a nationalism which does not threaten anyone else; it is pride in your own country that is very justified. And then you have the other kind of nationalism that appears on some websites in China that call for an immediate attack on Taiwan or a military battle with the United States, which is a kind of xenophobic, anti-foreign, militaristic nationalism that is much more threatening. So there are different types of nationalism, and all of them exist. I mentioned two, but I think you could slice it up even more and identify many different streams of nationalist thinking that are popular among different parts of the population. And they are all there, and I think they all draw strength from these different factors that you mentioned.

Now, can you compare that to American exceptionalism? On one level, I think every country is exceptional. There is French exceptionalism and Russian exceptionalism in the sense that each of these countries has a national narrative, national identity, an idea of the superiority of its culture, and a sense of its contribution to global culture. In terms of the content of American exceptionalism, there exists this idea that we are the best economic and political model for all of humanity. We tell other people what to do, and nobody tells us what to do because we have the answer. We are the cutting edge of civilization. If this "city on a hill" idea is your definition of American exceptionalism, then I think that the mainstream of China does not yet have this idea.

There are some people in China who have that kind of idea—that the Chinese model is a model for others. There is also the view, which has deep historical roots, that China is the most civilized place in the whole world, and that other peoples will benefit from learning from them, especially these ideas about correct human ethics and human relationships and so on. And, now that the Western model is having some economic and political trouble, there are some people saying that the Chinese economic and political model—a kind of authoritarian capitalism—maybe is the answer, or is the better system.

But I am not sure that there are many people in China who think that every country in the world should adopt the Chinese system, from Saudi Arabia to Venezuela. At this point, the official concept stated by the Chinese government is that there are many different civilizational traditions in the world that are equally respectable, and that theirs is one. I do not know of any serious Chinese thinker who says that all countries should have a big bureaucracy, meritocracy, state-owned enterprises, a ruling communist party, and all of the other things that China has. Whereas in the United States, there is the idea that all of these different countries should have a two-party system, separation of powers, capitalism, and the free market. So in that sense, I do not think that China has reached the point where they believe that other countries should model themselves on the Chinese system, and in that way it is very different from the view that many Americans hold.

Journal: Turning away from nationalism and towards geopolitical issues, has China become more assertive in protecting its enunciated core national interest of territorial integrity since Xi's ascendancy to the top leadership role? What is the overarching Chinese grand strategy in the South and East China Seas?

Nathan: I think the Chinese strategy is the following: having a dominant or very strong naval presence and reducing the American presence in the “near seas” is crucial for Chinese security. And as you know, the United States has a very large naval and air presence all around the maritime periphery of China. We have a lot of ships, a lot of planes, and a lot of personnel in Japan and South Korea. We sell weapons to Taiwan. We have forces in the Philippines. We have military cooperation with Singapore, Vietnam, and so forth. Our ships are operating in the South and East China Seas all the time. So, the Chinese feel that there is too much of an American presence in these areas, and that they must reduce that presence and increase their own.

And then they look at the strategic balance, where their economy has been growing very fast, and they have been modernizing their navy very quickly. Meanwhile, the American economy has been recovering slowly from a crisis, and our naval forces are actually reducing in size on a global level. They feel that we have a weak president [referring to President Obama], and that we have a weak political system with a divided administration versus Congress [under the Obama administration]. We have these chaotic presidential elections. So they think that this is a moment in history where the American system is weak, and where their own system, their own resources and military, are increasing. So it is a good time to try to take steps to change the balance of

power in the near seas. Not to start a war. Not to get the Americans completely out. Not to necessarily pick a fight with Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, or any other countries, but to change the relative balance of power in the region. They try to weaken the U.S.-Japan alliance as well. That is the overarching strategy.

I think the way that they seek to do that is on a careful step-by-step basis. They have built up seven sand islands on rocks that they already controlled. Nobody can do anything about it because they are not driving some other country off of those rocks and making a war out of it. The United States is not a claimant to those rocks and does not have a valid legal reason to use military force to prevent China from doing it. They are just building up what they already have. And in the Senkaku/Diaoyu area, where they feel that they have a valid territorial claim, they have increased their presence with more ships, more planes, more fishing boats, and more coastguard ships without triggering a war because it has not come to the point of a war-type crisis. And I think that is their strategy: to gradually increase their deployments in the near seas without creating or triggering a war, and to keep up the pressure on the other side, on the U.S. in particular, with the belief that sooner or later the U.S. will quietly reduce their presence. In their view, the tide of history suggests that the U.S. is far away and short on money, and that it will reduce its presence. I think that is the strategy.

Journal: While China may be taking a careful approach to its strategy with the U.S., historically speaking, when a rising power confronts a ruling power, more often than not the two powers come into conflict, a phenomenon known as the Thucydides Trap. In your opinion, will the United States and China fall into the Thucydides Trap?

Nathan: I do not think that there will be a war between the United States and China. I think that, first of all, there are so many common interests between the two countries. Secondly, a war between two such large countries with nuclear weapons would be really unwise and against the interests of both countries. Third, the conflicts of interest that are very real and important between the two countries are certainly there, but they are not existential. The United States is not planning to invade China, and China is not planning to invade the United States. I think the Chinese leadership believes that the United States would like to overthrow the Communist Party, and I think that the United States would prefer if the Chinese Communist Party would reform itself into something that we could recognize as a type of democracy. But the United States is not undertaking any effective measures to overthrow the Chinese regime. I do not think there is an existential threat that would make it necessary for either side to go to war.

There are some serious frictions of the type I was describing before—for example, the United States military presence in the South China Sea and East China Sea—that cause tension and stress. There are economic issues. There are human rights issues. There are all of these big issues. But I think that they will be managed by a process of partly negotiation and trust-building, partly testing, some sort of posturing and friction, and maybe accidents or military incidents. But if an incident occurs, for example if two ships were to collide in the South China Sea, or a Japanese and Chinese ship were to fire at one another in the Senkaku/Diaoyu area, I would expect both sides to

be keen to de-escalate such a conflict. So I am optimistic that there will not be a war in the foreseeable future.

Does the United States welcome China's peaceful rise? In my opinion, it really does welcome it in the hope that China will be stable and prosperous, contributing to the stability of the region and to economic prosperity in the U.S. and worldwide. But that does not mean that the issues that I mentioned will go away. The United States has big problems with China. It has problems especially with the fact that foreign enterprises are not able to compete on an equal basis in the Chinese market. And we have issues with China's attempts to export its thought control to the West through influence over Hollywood movies, efforts to control Western journalism, and so on. So there are some things that we do not welcome that are going to be issues. But not to the level of warfare.

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