Politics in China: Has the People’s Government Set Itself up for a People’s Revolt?

By Jordan Fischer

This paper identifies and analyzes the economic and social effects of China’s rapid modernization, accelerated thanks to reformist policies enacted by the “second generation” of the Chinese Communist Party (starting in the late 1970s), in order to speculate about the future of Chinese politics and society. The most notable and relevant economic and social effects of the demographic acceleration (modernization) are an increase in academic pressure on youth and young adults; the lack of public care for elderly or sick, causing increasing pressure on their families; the gap between China’s job market and its labor force; and economic inequality as the rich get richer in the booming economy. Political unrest in the People’s Republic of China would be possible in the near future if these social strains are left unattended. However, the Chinese government seems more than capable of incorporating reform into its governance, and unrest is unlikely to get out of control.

In the West, knowledge of the People’s Republic of China is rarely attained first-hand. In general, understanding of the rising power is filtered through the perceptions and biases of reporters and politicians, wherein the modern country is often portrayed either as a relic of the Cold War era with an oppressive and dangerous communist government or as the next economic superpower with an oppressive and dangerous communist government. Many Western and democratic minds claim that China’s one-party government system is bound to face significant opposition from its people, and soon, thanks to globalization and advances among the country’s growing middle class. China’s rapid modernization, increasing education, and highly prioritized economic progress, largely linked to the economic and social reforms of the 1970s and 1980s—including the notorious One-Child Policy—have led to significant social, economic, and political strains in the country’s modern society. Many speculate that under such heavy social strains, China is bound to erupt into political upheaval in the near future (Cody, 2006; Goldstone, 1980; Grammaticas, 2011; Hudson, 2012; Troullad, 2011; Xia, 2011).

In order to understand the possibilities and probabilities of political and social unrest in the People’s Republic of China, it is essential to explore the current Chinese social climate as affected by the country’s demographic-acceleration reforms, especially the One-Child Policy; the implications of these reforms on education and societal expectations; the realities of the Chinese economy and job market today; the causes of social unrest throughout the world, including the model of the “Arab Spring”; and how China’s social ills are likely to manifest themselves in China’s current political and social environment. Finally, I will argue that the time might soon come for China’s government to change substantially, but that change is most likely to come from within the Chinese Communist Party than from outside.

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REFORM, FERTILITY TRANSITION, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

Under Chairman Mao, the Chinese economy and society were closed to most foreign interaction and controlled heavily by the government. However, after Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping, who became paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1978, instigated the “reform and opening” (Gaige Kaifang) of the Chinese economy (and in many ways, the society), beginning a new era of leadership and policy in the People’s Republic. Instead of the harsh revolutionary thinking that brought the impoverished nation the Cultural Revolution, China was now working towards—and beginning to achieve—great economic gains. Though he was only one man, “Mr. Deng symbolized the Chinese aspiration to move beyond the ideological extremism that marked the Mao era and reclaim for the Chinese a long-denied prosperity” (Tyler, 1997, p. 11). The road to this prosperity, however, was far from smooth. The transition from a communist economy to a capitalist one has left untold numbers of workers fending for themselves, sick and elderly suddenly without medical care, and all citizens in the midst of a harsh competition to come out on top of the young capitalist market system (Fong, 2004).

One of Deng’s harshest and arguably most effective policies was China’s Family Planning Policy, commonly referred to as the One-Child Policy,
implemented in 1979, under which urban couples of Han Chinese descent (the ethnic majority in China) were allowed only one child. Thus, each family produced only one “high-quality” child (meaning well-educated and with ambitious, first-world goals), as opposed to many children of “low-quality” (as a result of not having enough resources to go around and therefore lacking in education, etc.). The government and the people hoped that by implementing this policy, along with the privatization of a sizable percentage of state-owned industries, Chinese society would be launched through the demographic transition into the so-called “first world” of developed countries, the core of the capitalist market system (Fong, 2004).

After the One-Child Policy took effect, urban Chinese families were forced quickly into a modern family dynamic. However, societal norms and expectations did not change as rapidly. Not only have modern Chinese singletons been brought up to believe that they will be a generation of educated, successful professionals in the capitalistic developed world, but on top of such modern responsibilities they face incredible pressure due to the deep-rooted tradition of filial piety: Chinese parents rely on their children alone to ensure their futures (Fong, 2004). The newly capitalistic Chinese government does not provide any state-run social security system, leaving modern singletons to support parents and even grandparents alone (Macartney, 2008). Because one child is unlikely to successfully support two elderly parents with only a middle-school diploma, education is of extremely high importance to these tiny families, especially in a highly competitive free-market economy. This has caused the overall rates of higher education to skyrocket, one of the main goals of modernization the government hoped to achieve from the Family Planning Policy and other reformist policies.

This educational system is centered rigidly around exams. Exams alone determine which students will achieve entry into a good high school, a good university, and a good graduate program. Considered by many to be the most important test a student will ever take, the national Chinese college entrance exam, called “Gao Kao,” or “tall/high test,” lasts nine hours, admits no tardy students, and is offered only once a year. Approximately 60% of students who take the Gao Kao are accepted by a college or university, but a two-year, four-year second-tier, or four-year top-tier institution (LaFreniere, 2009). “If students do well, they win spots at China’s top universities and an easy route to a middle-class lifestyle. If not, they must confront the kind of tough, blue-collar lives their parents faced” (Clark, 2008, p. 3), supporting themselves and their families in a society with a steadily rising cost of living. Such an examination system, while favoring the elite who can afford any expense to enable a student’s success, still provides the lower class poor with the possibility of upward social mobility—something of increasing importance in China’s rapidly dividing society of rich, high-class citizens and poor, low-class citizens.

In efforts to do well on such tests, most children and adolescents study obsessively at least six days a week for almost every waking hour, usually under the vigilance of their parents, who often watch over their children for hours as they study in complete silence (Fong, 2004). “With only one child to carry the load, parents’ fortunes are tied to their child’s, and they push (and pamper) the little ones accordingly” (Clark, 2008, p. 11). Although they put intense pressure on their singletons, frequently reminding them that they are the family’s most important treasure and only hope, parents also dedicate vast portions of the family’s resources to their children’s comfort—all in the name of helping them focus or making the most of their studying time (Lim, 2010; Fong, 2004). Small family sizes make for ambitious singletons with the full support, and heavy expectations, of their parents, just as the government planned.

Such strain can lead to an unhealthy mental environment for the country’s youth: China’s official news agency, Xinhua, estimates that 30 million adolescents under the age of 17 suffer from significant mental-health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Unfortunately for these troubled teens, psychological help is not likely on the way, with some estimates placing the number of qualified psychological professionals at 2,000 nationwide (Clark, 2008). It seems that in the nation’s haste to update itself, China’s youth have also picked up some of the negative aspects of modernization, while the adult professional world still lags far behind the capacity to help them.

THE PARADOXICAL CHINESE JOB MARKET

CAN THERE BE TOO MUCH EDUCATION?

Faced with the growing pressure of supporting their parents and even their grandparents, students are desperate for stable, high-paying professional jobs. Unfortunately for this ambitious generation, getting a college degree is one thing, but attaining a job with said degree is another entirely. In 2007, 4.1 million students graduated from Chinese universities. In the same year, however, only 1.6 million jobs opened up for degree-holders (Clark, 2008). China’s economy is progressing quickly, but not quickly enough to keep up with its own crowded educational system.

The average education level actually required for the jobs available in China is now far below the average education level of citizens seeking to enter the workforce. Workers with higher education must regularly take jobs that are educationally below them, a phenomenon that has encouraged a practice of rejecting applicants with less than a university diploma, even for very low-level positions. Because of this higher education becomes increasingly demanded, as workers try to remain competitive, thus exacerbating the problem of too many college degree-holders seeking employment in a job market with few professional jobs (Fong, 2004; Cody, 2006).

This phenomenon, often dubbed “diploma inflation” or “credential inflation,” is not unheard-of in developed countries, but is rarely so extreme as in the case of rapidly modernizing China. While China’s population becomes increasingly educated, its economy remains substantially entrenched in the industrial and service sectors, with relatively few jobs for degree-holding professionals. “After years in which graduates were ensured of a good job in the fast-growing economy, the number of degree-holders has outstripped the number of jobs, and the guarantees have evaporated” (Cody, 2006, p. 4).

Many college graduates, unable to find jobs that suit them, either settle for jobs in the service industry (such as posts in security or at restaurants), or sink into depression (Cody, 2006; Clark, 2008). “Faced with bleak prospects, elite only children often don’t know how to cope; they’ve been brought up to do only one thing: succeed” (Clark, 2008, p. 22).

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After spending nearly all their time studying, under the strong belief that if they just study harder everything will fall into place, and plagued by their parents’ ambitions as well as their own, a startlingly high percentage of these graduates turn to suicide. Suicide is now the leading cause of death for Chinese citizens ages 20 to 35 and overall the fifth most common cause of death in China. One official study estimated that more than 25% of Chinese university students have had suicidal thoughts, whereas only about 6% of United States university students have experienced similar feelings (Clark, 2008).
Officials cannot ignore such a monumental number of unemployed or underemployed youth, growing by about 2.5 million every year. In an interview with China Daily newspaper, Zhang Juwei, deputy director of China’s Institute of Population and Labor Economics, acknowledges that the problem is both serious and persistent. He relates that many graduates have gone into work in the industrial sector, including as construction workers, a position usually reserved for uneducated migrant workers from the countryside (Zhang, 2011), one of China’s most humble social groups. Although the government has focused on creating jobs for and building up its growing middle-class, the number of unemployed graduates continues to grow (Fukuyama, 2011).

**WILL SOCIAL STRAINS LEAD TO POLITICAL UNREST?**

Job market disequilibrium, economic inequality, a lack of social services, and other factors like ethnic tensions are all major concerns for modern Chinese society. But how important should these concerns be to the Chinese government and for what reasons? In order to understand and analyze the possibility of widespread social unrest in the People’s Republic of China, it is important to understand the causes of social unrest the world over. Esteemed author/analyst Francis Fukuyama turns to Samuel Huntington’s “Political Order in Changing Societies,” published in 1968, to shed light on the roots of unrest in any society. In this book, Huntington explains his theory that revolutions are caused by “a gap between the newly mobilized, educated and economically empowered people and their existing political system” (Fukuyama, 2011, p. 6). Fukuyama adds, “all social revolutions are driven by intense anger over injured dignity” (Ibid.). Both of these factors played key roles in the revolutions that took place in the Middle East and Northern Africa in 2011 (Almond, 2011; Fallows, 2011; Fukuyama, 2011).

In a comprehensive review of the modern study of revolution, Jack Goldstone lists a number of conditions long-believed to have a positive correlation with revolutionary movements. In addition to the obvious key factor of dissatisfaction with the ruling party’s current political direction, Gladstone cites “the long-term effects of modernization and urbanization, short-term economic reversals, and the systematic closure of political or economic opportunities to selected ethnic or economic groups” as circumstances traditionally believed to be capable of leading to social revolt (Goldstone, 1980, p. 427).

Recent scholars, however, have come to a slightly different conclusion after conducting more detailed analyses of revolutions, explaining that such factors, even when coupled with frustration over current politics, are still not necessarily enough to cause a threatening revolutionary movement. D.E.H. Russell’s work, for example, “has demonstrated that revolution is impossible where armed forces are intact and effectively used” (Goldstone, 1980, p. 436), and other scholars of revolution have found that highly centralized government, developed economies, general agreement between wealthy/powerful elites and the government, and upward social mobility serve as major distractions from a society’s revolutionary potential. The BBC’s Mark Almond agrees: “What collapses a regime is when insiders turn against it. So long as police, army and senior officials think they have more to lose by revolution than by defending a regime, then even mass protests can be defied and crushed” (Almond, 2011, p. 10). However, strong pressure, support or, conversely, a lack of support from international players can push a society closer to breaking point (Goldstone, 1980; Almond, 2011).

**POLITICAL UNREST IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

In speculation about political upheaval in China, many turn to 2011’s Arab Spring as a model: politicians ranging from U.S. Senator John McCain (Hudson, 2012) to some within the Chinese central government itself (Fallows, 2011) can be found among the myriad journalists who have been speaking, writing, or acting with the potential of the connection in mind.

The revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring spread from the self-immolation of a single jobless Tunisian graduate throughout the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, as civilians in numerous countries in the region – largely young and educated – staged major or minor protests, rioted, and even engaged in outright combat (Guardian News, 2011). Social and political movements had begun in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, within a year of the initial actions in Tunisia in December 2010 (Guardian News, 2011). Many demonstrations resulted in bloody clashes and complete regime changes were achieved in Tunisia (January 14, 2011), Egypt (February 11, 2011), and Libya (August 26, 2011).

In both Egypt and Tunisia, two states at the forefront of the Arab Spring, revolutionary movements were led by educated, middle-class young people whose aspirations were foiled by their governments’ repressive policies, keeping them from expressing themselves or realizing their full economic and political potential (Fukuyama, 2011). Improving conditions and expanding global communications in these countries have led to impressive social progress, causing discontent among educated youth who compare their country’s backward regimes to the economic and political freedoms they observe in other parts of the world. The UN reports that Tunisia’s Human Development Index (a combined measurement of health, education, and income) has improved from .436 in 1980 to .683 in 2010, a 56.7% improvement in 30 years, moving from below to above the world’s average. Egypt, the UN reports, has gone from a Human Development Index of .393 in 1980 to .620 in 2010, a 57.8% improvement in 30 years. Major channels of organization throughout the protests include cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter (Fukuyama, 2011), testifying both to the modern nature of the movements and their on-the-ground flexibility.

**COULD POLITICAL UNREST "SPREAD" TO CHINA?**

The Arab Spring sparked considerable speculation about the fate of the Chinese government (Fallows, 2011; Grammaticas, 2011; Hudson, 2012; Troullad, 2011; Xia, 2011). The People’s Republic instigated significant reinforcement and increase of censorship within its borders while assuring spectators and citizens alike that all was well. Nonetheless, speculation was persistent. Would the common Chinese graduate learn from MENA’s example and rise up against his government? Change might be at hand in China. There is reason to believe that an uprising could occur within the People’s Republic, but political revolt of the lower classes is not the only—or the best—way that change might come to this nation.

**REASONS FOR THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT TO WORRY**

Just like Tunisia and Egypt, China’s population has experienced rapid social development over the past three decades. The UN reports that China’s

Human Development Index in 1980 was .368, compared to .663 in 2010.2 This means China has experienced a whopping 80% increase in human development in just three short decades. Just as in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, educated younger generations face limited opportunities, in part because of political restrictions (as was the case in MENA) but mostly because even though China’s economy is currently growing faster than any other in the world, their society is changing faster still. In China, there are currently millions of unemployed and underemployed college-educated youth, whose ranks swell every year as the increase in number of high-level jobs cannot keep up with the annual increases in the number of graduates (Clark, 2008; Fukuyama, 2011).

On the topic of comparison between China’s political state and the MENA region’s protests, Singaporean analyst Huang Jing points out that the unemployment rate for many of the protesting Arab countries had been high for some time, most heavily for educated young people, and admits that, “high unemployment rates for university graduates usually lead to problems” (Ji, 2011, para. 4). Such problems as mass demonstrations and political unrest might arise in the near future if the economy that the government so carefully monitors is unable to provide a solution to the imbalances in the job market, or takes an unexpected downward turn.

Aside from the over-educated, under-employed youth, who else in China might be upset with the government? Feelings of “intense anger over injured dignity” (Fukuyama, 2011, p. 26) are known all too well by both protesters in the MENA region and many “ordinary people” in China, or those who have been largely left behind by the charging economy. Feng Hai Bo, a Chinese man whose mother is on trial for resisting when local authorities tried to force her and many other villagers out of their homes in a land grab last year, asserts, “The biggest problem is that our civil rights are not respected. I feel that the way the government treats ordinary people is really unjust. Even our personal freedoms aren’t protected” (Grammaticas, 2011, para. 30).

It is not at all uncommon for “ordinary people” to have their rights run over as China’s rapidly developing economy plows ahead. Fukuyama asserts, “The most typical case of outraged dignity in contemporary China is a local government that works in collusion with a private developer to take away the land of peasants or poor workers to make way for a glittery new project, or a company that dumps pollutants into a town’s water supply and gets away with it because the local party boss stands to profit personally. (Fukuyama, 2011, para. 12) With the growing gap between the country’s rich and poor spurred by increasing development (Morrison, 2006), not only the nation’s struggling students (and their unsupported parents), but also villagers and poor migrant and factory workers who see the extravagant life-styles of China’s growing privileged classes are increasingly likely to feel hopeless and that they have “nothing to lose.” Huang Jing considers these two sentiments “essential conditions” for a full-scale revolt against the government (Ji, 2011).

PROTESTS IN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC

Public protests occurring in the People’s Republic have been increasing steadily since the brutal shut-down of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Lorentzen, 2010), and in the first half of 2011, numbers of both protests and crackdowns on protests rose more sharply, and Internet security measures multiplied and strengthened. Many human rights lawyers, writers, and activists were detained under shaky charges, including Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist Liu Xiaobo and artist Ai Weiwei. While some speculate that the government’s increase in vigilance has been an overcautious reaction, others speculate that the harsher censorship and smothering of protests are necessary for the government to maintain control of a growing proportion of discontented public (Fallows, 2011).

Whether or not a dangerous revolution is on the way, officials are aiming to err on the side of being prepared. Singaporean analyst Huang Jing observes, “All threats...lie within China’s borders” (Ji, 2011, para. 7). Fittingly, the Ministry of Finance budgeted nearly $95 billion for “maintaining stability” in 2011—an increase of more than 21% from the year before—while allotting less than $92 billion for the purpose of external defense and military (Xia, 2011). The well-funded government effort to keep unrest to a minimum includes smothering and/or covering up protests against unemployment, economic inequality/social injustice, and ethnic tensions, often heavily utilizing Internet control.

Protests organized through online social media and forums are likely to result in both a demonstration nipped in the bud, as well as an increase in firewall controls on that online medium. In addition to a recent worsening of the on-going protests of self-immolation in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (Ortolani, 2012), significant tensions exist between the Chinese government and activists in the Uyghur Autonomous Region, which experienced a major upheaval in summer 2009, causing China to permanently block social media giant Facebook (Bass, 2009), among other social media sites.

In the last few years, China’s swelling ranks of Internet users have been increasing activity even in spite of the government’s “Great Firewall,” the national Internet censorship system whose security has been reinforced and expanded since the beginning of the MENA uprisings (Fallows, 2012; Fukuyama, 2011). Even without foreign inspiration, China’s disgruntled citizens have increasingly sought to voice their demands. According to a report from Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University, 72 significant occurrences of social unrest were quelled throughout the country in 2010, 20% more than in 2009. The real number of incidents is quite likely to be significantly larger than 72, because protests that take place in remote or rural areas—places where unrest is likely to occur—are much more easily covered up by the People’s Government and censored out of the media (Fukuyama, 2011). However, while many activists hope that the protest movement continues to grow, a revolution might not be the best thing for China or its people.

REASONS FOR THE PEOPLE’S GOVERNMENT TO RELAX

It is true that growing numbers of underemployed college graduates are a problem for China just as they were in the Arab world leading up to the Arab Spring. However, young people in China have a heavy obligation that is far lighter for their counterparts in large Tunisian or Egyptian families: the single-handed support of their parents and grandparents (Fallows, 2011). The increasingly top-heavy population pyramid that the One-Child Policy has shaped in China leaves the country with fewer disillusioned young people relative to the number of elderly that they must support, unlike the populations in most Arab countries where families are traditionally very large. Most young people in China are too busy trying to educate themselves, gain employment, and support their parents to dedicate much time to serious political revolt.

Furthermore, although both educated middle-class people in China and rebels in the MENA region have not been allowed any political voice through voting, citizens in China do have something that their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt did not: upward social mobility. The merit-based

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or underemployed and discontented youth. China’s economic success has left another unsatisfied party in its wake: rural poor. Most farmers and migrant workers are unable to afford quality education for their children, leading to an increasing polarization of the nation’s rich and poor.

In spite of prevalent social and economic problems, mass social unrest and popular uprisings, like those seen in the Arab Spring, are unlikely to be emulated in the People’s Republic of China in the near future. So long as the government continues to address its people’s concerns at least to the current degree, we can expect continued stability. Although many of the One-Child Policy’s generation of ambitious singletons find themselves without reasonable job prospects after completing expensive educations, and the nation’s remaining poor find themselves getting trampled over and left behind, few citizens consider full regime change a constructive solution. Most Chinese nationals hope to avoid the radicalism, instability, and misfortune brought upon them by Mao Zedong’s communist revolution, which remain fresh in the minds of many. Instead, the discontented seek change within the party, calling on the government to “bridge the rich-poor divide, establish rule of law, and guarantee pensions and health care” (Trouillaud, 2011, para. 18). As with the transfer from Mao Zedong’s revolution to Deng Xiaoping’s reform, the capacity for a relatively smooth transition between generations, economic models, and even ideologies has been demonstrated by the CCP in the past; it should continue to be possible today.

Nonetheless, any group of battered citizens will eventually reach a breaking point if left unappeased, and the government must stay vigilant to remain at the head of a reasonably peaceful nation. To prevent wide-scale unrest, the People’s Government should be—and is—wary of two principle phenomena that are currently keeping its people relatively content. First, the economy has been growing steadily for the past 30 years, and the people’s fortunes along with it. A prolonged recession or other economic crises could result in disaster for the CCP. The party has asked its people to put up with tremendous sacrifices, all in the name of economic development. It appears that, for now, the Chinese people are willing to give up direct political participation, allow significant corruption, and accept significant personal sacrifice in favor of economic gains and nationwide demographic advancement. However, if that promise of development falls through and the economy suffers from a significant recession or other crisis, the government will have to answer to hoards of angry citizens. Experts warn that “if the country’s current property bubble bursts and tens of millions of people are thrown out of work, the government’s legitimacy, which rests on its management of the economy, would be seriously undermined” (Fukuyama, 2011, para. 22).

Second, the government must ensure that future heads of the party continue to use their power in the relatively benign way that they have done since Deng Xiaoping. While censorship has been increased in response to the government’s recently-heightened fears of political unrest, popular opinion in China often labels such measures temporary. It would be unwise of the government to betray its people’s good faith; if conditions continue to worsen and censorship becomes stricter, China’s people are likely to grow increasingly discontented. Many (especially Western) critics argue that a one-party system is not designed to prevent tyranny, which leads to the logical conclusion that the Chinese government must work extra hard to do so. Regular rotation of power and continued identification and management of the people’s problems are essential to the party’s sustained and stable rule. Although the harrowing memory of Mao’s revolution can serve as a deterrent to political upheaval, it can also serve as a warning against dictatorial government. China’s new modernized, educated, and first-world generations would not likely stand for a return to conditions such as those under life-long radical power-holder Mao Zedong.

The social changes that China’s rapid modernization wrought were in many cases startling and abrupt, and often resulted in a significant strain on society that cannot be ignored. Government officials generally recognize the serious problems caused by their policies publicly, such as the intense pressure put on students and the underdeveloped job market. The situation is currently troubled, but remains under control for the time being. Nonetheless, Beijing must be, and is, careful to keep social tensions from fulfilling their potential to lead to widespread popular revolt that neither the government nor the majority of the people desire, protecting the Chinese economy, and attempting to minimize measures of oppression on its people. Substantial change in governance in order to keep up with the rapidly changing society would be plausible in China in coming years, but not from revolts; instead this transition would be most likely and most prosperously achieved from within the Chinese Communist Party itself. The government’s current path is not paved in stone. Chas Freeman compares the current situation in China to that in Taiwan in the 1970s: “Taiwanese of that era would tell him that, corrupt or not, the party was steadily bringing prosperity.... The parallel with mainland China was obvious. A generation later, Taiwan had become democratized” (Fallows, 2011, para. 31). While democracy may not be the right choice for China, a substantial degree of reform would benefit both the people and their government. The CCP has proven itself capable of major adaptations before, and it may soon demonstrate once again that it has the ability to endure atop the massive and dramatically changing Chinese society.

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