1. Unrest and regime survival
Andrew Wedeman

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of China's communist regime has been predicted for nearly two decades. Yet despite ample evidence of unrest, the regime has displayed remarkable resilience. In this chapter, I begin by examining the evidence on China's internal security environment, highlighting the range and complexity of the challenges the regime faces. I then analyze the "coming collapse" thesis both as it has been applied to China and as it is related to the literature on contentious politics. Ultimately, the key flaw with the coming collapse argument lies in its determinism. It seems clear that there is considerable unrest in China, but the dynamics of contention are far more complex and contingent than as presented in the coming collapse thesis.

In the late 1990s, Shambaugh and others sought to answer the "big" question: "Is China unstable?"[1] At the time, communism in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact had imploded a decade earlier and been swept into the "dustbin of history." Deng Xiaoping, the regime's strongman, had died in 1997. The double-digit growth rates of the mid-1990s had fallen sharply, and social unrest was increasing. In 1993, the Ministry of Public Security reported there had been 8,700 "mass incidents"—illegal assemblies (24 a day). Five years later, the ministry reported the number had increased nearly three-fold to 25,000 (69 a day).[2]

A major effort to restructure the money-losing state industrial sector by shutting down or "restructuring" bankrupt enterprises had produced massive layoffs of members of the old Maoist "proletariat" and the transformation of many old industrial areas into rustbelts. Poorly educated and often unskilled, laid-off workers faced devastating losses of income and benefits. Many also felt betrayed by a regime that had lionized them as the vanguard of the revolution and promised them an "iron rice bowl." A wave of massive strikes rocked the rustbelt. Migrant workers in the new industrial "sunbelt" in south China also rose in protests against low wages, poor working conditions, and discrimination.[3]

Farmers, whose incomes had risen in the 1980s, saw their incomes first stagnate in the 1990s and then fall as cash-starved local governments hit them with new taxes and fees.[4] In 1993 10,000 farmers in Sichuan rose up, attacking officials, sacking government buildings, and battling with police.[5] In 1997, some 130 protestors reportedly died in clashes between villagers and police after local governments failed to provide disaster relief for hundreds of thousands displaced by flooding.[6]

In April 1999, over 10,000 adherents of a theretofore relatively obscure group named Falun Gong emerged out of nowhere to surround Zhongnanhai, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership compound in central Beijing, to silently protest allegations that the group was an "evil cult."[7] With a claimed membership of 70 million, many of them retired party cadres and state functionaries, Falun Gong seemed to attract those disillusioned by the Party's loss of an ideological vision and embrace of a "soul-less"

materialism which stressed getting rich at any cost. More critically, not only had Falun Gong mobilized a massive protest without tipping over the public security apparatus, it had also refused to meekly retreat underground when banned. On the contrary, members of the group mounted a sustained campaign of small-scale "guerrilla" protests.[8] Falun Gong was moreover just one of dozens of religious groups challenging the state's claims to ideological hegemony.[9]

There were new rumblings of ethnic unrest in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. In Tibet, which had experienced unrest during 1987 and 1988, a wave of separatist protests erupted in 1993 that continued into 1996.[10] In Xinjiang, armed assaults, assassinations, and bombings increased sharply as discontent spread among ethnic Uyghurs.[11] Serious ethnic rioting occurred in the city of Yining in early 1997, followed by a series of bus bombings and ethnic clashes.[12]

Criminal gangs were reportedly spreading rapidly and had imposed a "reign of terror" on some communities.[13] By the early 1980s, the regime reportedly feared it "was losing control over . . . the 'balance of awe' between the Party-state and criminals" and turned to a "bloody" strategy of "Strike Hard" anti-crime crackdowns.[14] Yet every year crime seemed to get worse.

Corruption ceased to be a local party problem in the spring of 1995 when Wang Baosen, a Vice Mayor of Beijing, committed suicide after being questioned about bags of cash delivered to a Ponzi scheme. Investigators quickly identified Beijing Party Secretary and Politburo member Chen Xitong as the source of Wang's money. Several years later, the official media revealed that smugglers had suborned customs agents, local officials, police officers, provincial officials, and senior officials in Beijing and were running entire shiploads of smuggled cars, tankers full of crude oil, containers of cigarettes, tons of steel, and other commodities through several ports. Elements of the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) were said to be running illegal goods in from Hong Kong.[15]

Despite ample evidence of what appeared to be mounting unrest, the Shambaugh group concluded that the outlook for political stability was far from grim and that China's internal security was best characterized as one of "rocky stability" or "stable unrest."[16] Others were less sanguine. In 2001, Chang famously announced that CCP rule would collapse within a decade, arguing that economic reform and rapid growth had begun to tear China apart.[17] He Qinglian warned: "Chinese society currently resembles a volcano on the verge of a major eruption. Nearly all Chinese can feel the heat from the subterranean fires."[18] Less dramatically, Shirk asserted that although sustained growth had given China trappings of a rising power, rising "domestic threats" had rendered China a "fragile superpower."[19]

The late 1990s economic slowdown proved short-lived. By 2003, growth rates had once again reached double digit levels, hitting 14.2 percent in 2007. Far from collapsing, China was booming. This "boom," however, ran afoul in the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent worldwide recession. After growing over 20 percent a month during 2006 and 2007, by early 2009—as migrant workers headed home for the Chinese New Year holiday—exports had "fallen off a cliff."[20] An estimated, 670,000 small enterprises shut down, throwing 6.7 million workers out of work. Dissident Wei Jingsheng warned that if the crisis was not quickly resolved, "the people will rise up."[21] A Western analyst described the prospect of returning migrants finding themselves without jobs as a "real recipe for instability."[22] Even the official Chinese press warned that mobs of unemployed migrant workers "milling around in cities" could riot.[23]

The explosion never happened. By the fall of 2009 the economy had begun to revive. In December, exports were up 17.6 percent compared to December 2008. Industrial output growth rates nearly doubled, rising to a strong 10.6 percent in 2010.[24] In part, the relatively quick revival of the Chinese economy was the result of prompt intervention by the central government. The leadership swiftly cobbled together a US$586 billion stimulus package that pumped money into infrastructural construction.[25] Tax breaks were created to induce consumers to replace older cars and buy new appliances.

However, China's internal security outlook did not appear to improve. On the contrary, collective unrest had continued to grow rapidly, with the number of mass incidents doubling to an estimated 187,000 in 2010, an average of 512 a day.[26]

In March 2008, rioting in Lhasa left two dozen Han civilians and an unknown number of Tibetans dead, and ushered in a new wave of unrest among ethnic Tibetans. Whereas unrest in the 1990s had focused on the Tibetan Autonomous Region, during 2008 the locus shifted to "Inner Tibet," an arc of territory in the neighboring provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan where in-migration of Han Chinese had tipped the ethnic balance against Tibetans.[27] After mass protests subsided in 2009, Tibetans turned to a new form of protest: self-immolation. Between August 2011 and April 2013, 116 Tibetans self-immolated or attempted to self-immolate, with 30 setting themselves alight in November 2012. Thereafter, the incidence of Tibetan self-immolation fell, but sporadic self-immolations nevertheless continued into 2017.[28]

Nineteen months after the Lhasa riot, Urumqi erupted on July 5, 2009.[29] Following a march protesting the killing of several Uyghurs in Guangdong, Uyghur demonstrators clashed with ethnic Han, many of them recent migrants from other parts of China. According to state media: "rock-flinging and knife-wielding thugs . . . killed nearly 200 people and injured another 1,700."[30] Uyghur activists, however, claimed that when the peaceful protesters approached the central business district, police opened fire on them.[31] The following morning the police found themselves confronting thousands of ethnic Hans armed with improvised weapons in anticipation of striking back at Uyghur neighborhoods. According to Uyghur sources, Han civilians beat innocent Uyghurs as the police went house to house arresting Uyghurs and killing upwards of 800.[32] A semblance of order was eventually restored, but the city was swept by a new hysteria in September by rumors of Uyghurs attacking Han with contaminated syringes.[33]

Inner Mongolia, which witnessed anti-Han protests in the early 1980s, was rocked in late 1989 when tens of thousands of Mongols joined protests calling for democracy and independence. Despite a police crackdown, ethnic nationalists formed the Southern Mongolian Democratic Alliance and a new round of demonstrations took place in 1995.[34] Thereafter, ethnic tensions appeared to die down, only to return in 2011 when clashes between Mongol herders, Han farmers, and Han coal haulers sparked a new wave of protests.

Conflicts between the state and dissent religious groups continued. Overseas Protestant organizations reported a new wave of "persecutions" beginning in 2006. Overseas Catholic groups reported arrests of underground believers. In 2013, government statistics show a 60 percent increase in arrests for illegal "cult" activity.

The press carried a steady stream of reports of "revenge against society" attacks by disgruntled individuals. In some cases, these attacks involved the use of improvised explosives. In other cases, disgruntled individuals attacked school children with knives.

Bomb threats added to the tensions, as did frequent accidental industrial and mine blasts, as well as occasional gas explosions at shopping malls, restaurants, apartments, and nightclubs. Bus bombings unnerved commuters. Attacks on doctors and hospital staff were reportedly on the rise.[35]

In the later 2000s, indictments for "endangering state security" shot up from 349 in 2005 to 1,407 in 2008 as the state battled a rising tide of what the 1993 State Security Law calls "subversion": organized, conscious efforts to undermine, disrupt, and overthrow the state and socialism.[36]

In sum, although there were signs of a deteriorating internal security environment at the time that the worldwide economic recession struck the Chinese economy, the regime survived a second major economic downturn of the type that some had argued would trigger a terminal political crisis. Flush with cash built up during the preceding boom years, the Party spent heavily and was able once again to muscle its way through. The quick recovery of the economy did not, however, lead to observable improvements in the internal security environment. On the contrary, things seemed to get worse after the economy improved.

THE COMING COLLAPSE

The apparent continued worsening of the internal security environment intensified speculation the CCP was entering its end game. In 2010, year before he predicted the CCP's collapse, Chang again claimed the regime's strength had become a mere façade that would remain standing only as long as the economy grew rapidly.[37] Few ordinary Chinese, however, believed in the Party, and many no longer feared it. Even members of the Party and the police anticipated that "this regime will not last long."[38]

However, public opinion polls showed that the Party remained surprisingly popular. Informed by conventional theories linking the rise of capitalism to demands for democracy, many were surprised to find that support for the regime was high, particularly among China's emerging capitalist class and its new middle class.[39] In retrospect, Wright observes, this finding should not have been surprising. China's new capitalists and middle class were, after all, the major beneficiaries of the Party's economic reforms.[40] Rapid growth had vastly increased their incomes; moved them from rundown walkup apartments; replaced their bicycles with cars; bought them flat screen TVs, laptops, and smartphones; allowed them to vacation overseas; and enabled them to send their children to expensive overseas universities. Moreover, the new-found wealth of the upper and middle classes was earned on the backs of the working class, whose low wages were essential to China's comparative advantage in low-cost labor. China's new "exploiters" thus had good reason not to demand mass democracy because the more numerous "have-nots" might use their weight in numbers to democratically expropriate the "haves."[41]

The haves' fear of the "threat from below" was not born out of pure paranoia. Although the Party's economic reforms had raised incomes and improved living standards for China's lower classes, they had benefited far less than the upper and middle classes. In fact, income inequality, which had fallen during the later Maoist period, had increased rapidly, with the result that China's GINI coefficient jumped from 30.0 in the 1980s to upwards of 50.0 in 2015.[42] A long academic tradition posits that rising inequal-

ity can create new threats to entrenched elites, particularly in non-democratic regimes.[43] Worsening inequality "creates incentives for disadvantaged groups to press for to press for more open and competitive politics."[44]

Polls, however, suggested that inequality was not creating a "social volcano."[45] A 2004 poll by Whyte found that most of those surveyed, including those whose income had not grown significantly, accepted growing income disparities and were optimistic about the future. Even the quarter of respondents who said they or someone they knew had suffered abuse at the hands of officials had a positive outlook. In a 2009 poll, Whyte found that even though income inequality had continued to increase, there had not been an increase in anger.[46] A 2014 poll also failed to reveal rising discontent over increasing social injustice.[47]

Having three times concluded that the social volcano was a "myth," Whyte suggested that "inequalities in power," "procedural injustice," and corruption were fueling the observed worsening of unrest. Half of those surveyed felt "officials don't care what ordinary people think." A majority felt it unfair that the rich and powerful received special treatment and privileges.[48] A quarter were pessimistic about the prospects for greater social justice.[49] Upward of a quarter reported that they or a member of their family had "experienced unfair treatment by local officials within the past three years."[50]

Like Whyte, Pei sees corruption as the major threat to the CCP. In 2014, he asserted that "the rot inside the CCP is now so deep and extensive that it is now threatening the regime's . . . survival." Autocratic regimes decay when officials and cadres become self-interested, focused on amassing their private wealth without regard for the long-term survival of the regime.[51] As officials focus on plunder, the regime splits into rival bands of looters, the integrity of the pillar institutions deteriorates, and ultimately the leadership fragments into hostile camps.[52] Attempts to fight corruption actually deepen internal fissures by creating a "Hobbesian" political environment dominated by bitter "winner-take-all" power struggles. Internally weak and fractured, such regimes become vulnerable to "exogenous . . . shocks . . . and unanticipated black swan events."[53] In 2016, Pei concluded that "regime decay has not reached its terminal stage"; but the CCP faced "a self-reinforcing dynamic" that could "accelerate quickly" and produce a "sudden authoritarian breakdown" in the not-too-distant future (perhaps within the next decade and half).[54]

In 2011, the year he had predicted the CCP would collapse, Chang declared that he had not been wrong about the collapse, only its timing. Protests, he wrote, were increasingly erupting into "uprisings, insurrections, rampages, and bombings" and hence "instead of 2011, the mighty Communist Party of China will fall in 2012."[55] After it did not, in 2016 Chang asserted: "China looks like it is entering another period of extreme political instability" and "another decade of chaos and madness or perhaps . . . regime failure."[56]

In 2015, Shambaugh abandoned his earlier thesis that the CCP was hidebound but durable,[57] writing instead that "China's political system is badly broken . . . the endgame of the Chinese communist rule has now begun."[58] Wealthy Chinese were preparing to "flee en masse," political repression was intensifying as "deep anxiety and insecurity" gripped the leadership, and the rank and file had begun "just going through the motions." He thus concluded: "We cannot predict when Chinese communism will collapse, but it is hard not to conclude that we are witnessing its final phase."

Shambaugh argued that in 2009, the leadership abandoned the cautious soft authoritarianism introduced by Jiang Zemin in 1998. Although the new hard authoritarianism's

emphasis on "stability maintenance" might hold social pressures at bay, it would lead first to political atrophy and then "inexorable decline," "economic stagnation," and "political instability." Collapse was not "imminent" or inevitable. But so long as the CCP leadership remained wedded to hard authoritarianism, the political system would steadily corrode as the "progressive" and "terminal" political cancer "metastasized."[59]

After two decades of unfulfilled predictions, it might be tempting to dismiss the proponents of the coming collapse thesis as gloomy and alarmist "prophets of doom" and embrace the counter thesis that the CCP has evolved a resilient authoritarianism that has proven capable of containing a shifting range of internal security threats.[60] The coming collapse thesis and resilience thesis are not, of course, mutually exclusive or contradictory. In both constructs, corruption occupies a central position. In the collapse thesis, reform has generated new wealth but has also led elites to corruptly grab at this new wealth, thus fueling popular discontent and sapping regime capacity. Attempts to assuage the public's anger by attacking corruption, however, expose the extent of corruption and further undermine public support while triggering power struggles among the elite and demoralizing the rank and file. As elite infighting worsens and popular cynicism deepens, officials begin to look for the exits while intensify their plundering. Ultimately, some "black swan" shock triggers the final collapse. The resilience thesis begins with similar assumptions about corruption, but assumes that the regime can slow the rot with a combination of anti-corruption and limited reforms, and thus render itself less vulnerable to random shocks. Both theses, moreover, predict the CCP is likely to hang on for another decade or more.

If collapse is not imminent, what then does it mean to say that China is "unstable"? Political stability is a fuzzy concept and is generally negatively defined. One definition holds that a stable regime is one that "possesses the capability to prevent its own forced non-survival."[61] Another defines stability as the extent to which a regime is vulnerable to "illegitimate political" challenges and "regime change."[62] A third defines stability as "the absence of violence, government longevity, the absence of structural change, legitimately, and effective decision making."[63] By this logic, if China is neither stable nor facing political collapse, we might best characterize its internal security environment as "contentious," which Tarrow defines as an environment characterized by "episodic, public, collective interaction" between rival political claimants whose interests impinge on the interests of other claimants, including the state.[64]

THE DYNAMICS OF CONTENTION

The dynamics of contentious politics are complex. Early theorists argued that anger and grievances drove individuals to rebel.[65] However, their assumptions proved to be problematic. Because deprivation, from whence anger and grievance presumably flowed, was not an objective condition but instead subjective and relative, it was subject to sudden shifts and reframing.[66] Others found that grievance was not just a product of economic inequality but was also perceived political inequality, lack of political freedom, and injustice, with the result that protestors did not have to be poor to be angry.[67]

Scholars thus rejected the argument that misery leads to rebellion in favor of the assumption that protestors were rational actors driven by their assumptions about the

expected utility of passively accepting adverse conditions or the more dangerous alternative of standing up to power.[68] Yet assuming that protestors and rebels were rational brought forth new complications. As Olson argued, one of the great political paradoxes of rebellion is that although deprivation and injustice are widespread, the downtrodden tend to suffer them. Only rarely do the poor and abused rebel.[69] Revolt, Olson argued, is rare because the oppressed face a "collective action" problem that discourages risky confrontations with power. Rather than risk arrest, injury, or death by rising up, the discontented should prefer to sit by while others battle the police and storm the "palace." If the rebels win, "free riders" can swoop in to enjoy the fruits of victory. If the rebels are crushed, the free riders can run home and hide. Widespread free riding will, however, strip the opposition down to the few rash, desperate, or crazy enough to risk injury, jail, and death—with the result that revolts are apt to be easily crushed.[70]

If deprivation was not sufficient, theorists argued that leadership and organization could overcome collective action problems.[71] Like Lenin,[72] these theorists argued that "political entrepreneurs" are needed to frame and focus discontent, build an "organization weapon," and then push the masses into the streets.[73] "Greed" for power or loot may motivate would-be rebel leaders and lure rebel fighters into the ranks.[74] Even when grievances spontaneously drive protestors into the streets, the availability of organization and resources determines whether such protests morph into open challenges to authority or sputter.[75]

Although political entrepreneurs may "manufacture" popular discontent out of thin air, in most cases they draw together diverse grievances and disaffected groups into a united front of resistance. United fronts and the appearance of a single "battle line" with authority, however, obscures the reality that rebellious movements are generally rooted in webs of diverse grievances.[76] Some who rise up against the status quo are motivated by anger born of deprivation and oppression, while others are driven by the lure of loot, power, and glory.[77]

Unrest is thus not a singular, uni-linear sequence of causal events, but rather multiple, evolving spirals or cascades that can unexpectedly erupt and unfold when tempers and frustrations begin to boil. Even when they reach some ill-defined threshold and spawn isolated acts of defiance, protests may fizzle out if the hardcore cannot convince others that a tipping point has been reached.[78] Once begun, however, protest tends to become "auto-regressive," with each round of protest fueling and swelling protests as new protestors jump on the bandwagon.[79] Given the right combination of anger and organization, therefore, even a seemingly minor spark can trigger a whirlwind of protest.[80] Collective action cascades can, however, also suddenly implode.[81]

Even when anger and organization combine, protests and demonstration often unfold in a complex and chaotic fashion. Protests designed to express grievances can morph into rioting and looting as "legitimate protestors"—those who want to air their grievances—are joined by others with less "legitimate" motives, including "hooligans" motivated by hatred of authority, a thirst for plunder, or a blind lust for mayhem.[82] Peaceful demonstrators can become enraged by the response of police and lash out with "blind fury." Or they may join because they get swept up by all the "excitement."[83] Temporary breakdowns of order can lead to widespread looting and arson that diverts the attention of protesters away from seeking political change in favor of "grabbing stuff."[84]

The state plays a central role in the dynamics of political contention. On a fundamental level, the state decides what are "acceptable forms of collective protest" against injustice

and what are unacceptable "riotous" challenges and "subversion."[85] If the disaffected protest, the state can allow small-scale protests and airing of grievances.[86] The state may ignore the protestors, assuming that they will cool off once they have "blown off steam."

Conversely, the state can brand dissent as illegitimate and actively repress it. This can take many forms.[87] The state can seek to nip unrest in the bud by preemptively putting potential protestors and political dissidents under surveillance, asking them to "have tea" and discuss the repercussions of "anti-social" behavior, or detaining individuals for short periods. It can deploy undercover agents to infiltrated dissident circles with the goal of gathering intelligence or provoking mutual suspicion and paranoia among the dissidents. The police and other security forces can take the offense against dissidents, using "state terror" to "neutralize" individual dissidents and harass, disrupt, intimidate, and paralyze dissident groups.[88] If small protests erupt, it can send in the police to forcibly break up demonstrations, arrest protest leaders, and signal that further protests will be met with truncheons, tear gas, and, if needed, deadly force.

If the state opts for active repression, it may crush visible dissent. Repression can, however, fail and actually increase unrest. Attacks on "enemies of the state" can backfire if peaceful dissents turn to defensive violence or embrace terrorism. "Collateral damage" caused by unfocused repression can alienate groups that otherwise might not have supported anti-regime dissent.[89] Harassment of civilians by the police conducting routine sweeps and searches for dissidents can create a hostile political environment that triggers new resistance and marginalizes other groups.[90]

On even a tactical level, how the police respond to demonstrations can determine whether protests remain peaceful or morph into rioting.[91] An aggressive response may cow; yet a forceful police response to non-violent protests may produce a shift toward violence.[92] Once unleashed, protest and repression may interact dynamically, with each continuously reshaping the perceived incentive structures of both protestors and police.[93] Protest and repression may thus interact in a pattern resembling an upward spiral in which protest triggers repression which causes a temporary decrease in dissent and a period of apparent quiescence during which the repression generates new and more intense discontent that then erupts in a new round of protest and increasingly harsh repression.[94] Spirals of protest and repression can be contagious, with protests in one locality triggering protests in others.[95] A half-hearted police response, conversely, may encourage an escalation of protest, and perhaps even a transition from protest to revolt as protestors find they can push the police aside and take control of the streets.[96]

A final factor affecting whether and how grievances and anger erupt into visible political unrest is the strength, cohesion, and will of the regime. In simple terms, a strong, cohesive regime whose leadership is willing to resist challenges is presumably both more likely to deter challenges and, should deterrence fail, defeat its challengers. Conversely, a weak regime riven by internal conflicts will likely encourage challenges and be less capable of countering them. In either instance, if the leadership is unwilling to fight back and is perceived to be wavering and unsure, then the discontented are more likely to believe that challenges will succeed.[97] The relationship between unrest and state capacity is thus not linear but rather curvilinear, with the highest levels of political violence associated with moderate levels of state capacity.[98]

How the state reacts to challenges depends on their subjective—and hence potentially flawed—beliefs about the current and future political environment. A self-confident

leadership may not see protests as a tangible threat; or it may believe it can deal with challenges should they emerge, and tolerate a certain level of open dissent. A less confident leadership may react aggressively to even minor threats because it fears that any sign of weakness will only encourage more challenges.[99] Misperception of the severity of the threat posed by protests can also lead the state to "overreact," believing that harsh repression will crush dissent, only to exacerbate tensions and radicalize dissenters. Conversely, misperception can lead the state to "underreact," underestimating the severity of its challenges until protests have reached a point where the security forces can no longer cope.[100] The perceived reliability of the regime's forces, finally, may affect how the leadership responds to challenges. When the police are strong and trustworthy, repression may be a viable option. If the police are weak and wavering, repression may not be an option or only a last, desperate resort.[101]

Corruption pays a complex role in the dynamics of unrest and repression. Abstractly, perceptions of widespread corruption undermine a regime's moral authority and legitimacy. Corruption is, quite simply, a ready symbol of gross violations of the public interest.[102] If officials seem wealthy, it becomes easier to convince the poor that elites have grown rich by feeding off "the people."[103] If officials are unjust, disgruntled citizens are apt to point to "corruption" as the root reason for misrule.[104] Just as the Riot Act allows the state to legitimate repression by branding protesters "hooligans," "bandits," or "rebels," invoking "corruption" enables protesters and rebels to justify challenging the existing political order.[105]

In China, corruption has been an enduring justification for resistance.[106] In the classic novel *Water Margin*, for example, the outlaws are portrayed as "loyal citizens," the "bulwarks of the moral order" who carry out the "Will of Heaven" by attacking "corrupt officials" and protecting "filial sons and virtuous women."[107] In the nineteenth century, the Taiping rebels claimed that Chinese society was locked into "a process of moral decline, an entropic movement in which bad practices, passed generation to generation, gradually produced ever deeper corruption" which justified the overthrow of a "dynastic house whose misgovernment and moral decay . . . violated the order of the relationship between Heaven and Earth" and robbed it of "Heaven's mandate to rule."[108] Chinese bandits frequently claimed to be "Robin Hoods" fighting greedy landlords and corrupt officials on behalf of the poor.[109]

The communists held up corruption as a central justification for their revolution. In his 1927 "Report on Hunan," Mao Zedong repeatedly pointed to the depredations of "corrupt officials" as the reason why the peasants rose up against the rural power structure.[110] Similarly, communist cadres in southern Henan called on the "reactionary" and "superstitious" Red Spear militia to join forces with the Party to defend rural society from the "predation of corrupt officials," "renegade soldiers," "local bullies," and "evil gentry."[111] In northern Shaanxi, the peasants associated "just revolution" not with the overthrow of the landlords, but rather with attacks on "corrupt power-holders."[112] More recently, members of "superstitious" local cults in northern Shaanxi justified anti-state agitation by charging that "local official[s] are good-for-nothing and corrupt, spending all their time eating, drinking . . . and dancing with prostitutes," and that "the local state is better at squeezing the people, not serving the people."[113] In the 1990s, laid-off workers frequently blamed the loss of their jobs on "managerial corruption."[114]

Concretely, corruption saps state resources, leaving it less able to finance the public goods that might ameliorate grievances and adequately fund the repressive apparatus needed to deter challenges.[115] The stereotypical "failed state" is, in fact, often portrayed as having been hollowed out by corrupt politicians, generals, and bureaucrats who plunder the treasury, loot the economy, and prey on the weak.[116] In failing states, "corruption flourishes," "the state becomes criminal and oppressive, lawlessness spreads, gangs . . . control . . . the streets . . . ordinary police forces become paralyzed."[117] Corruption creates a particularly vicious cycle within ranks of the security forces by sapping the state's ability to adequately pay them and forcing individual officers and soldiers to prey on the public.[118]

In sum, the literature on dynamics of contention suggests that although we may observe examples of widespread unrest and even subversion in contemporary China, it is not clear how the diverse sources of unrest "add up," and hence how unstable China is internally. In broad terms ethnic unrests in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Nei Menggu (the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region) do not combine with farmers' protests over the expropriation of their farmland by corrupt local officials in the rapidly urbanizing coast provinces. Dissent by members of underground churches need not be a direct threat to the regime, and may actually be rendered "subversive" if the state decides to brand it as such. Moreover, the regime has demonstrated an ability to at least "cope" with a wide and shifting range of challenges.

CONCLUSION

After two decades of unfulfilled predictions of the CCP's imminent demise, it is tempting to dismiss the coming collapse thesis as naïve and built on the belief that communism is bankrupt and doomed, and to treat its advocates as prophets of doom who fixate on each new report of political instability and social unrest as a potential precursor of political Armageddon. The coming collapse thesis, at least in its more sophisticated forms, is not necessarily flawed. In essence, it posits that rapid economic growth has yielded negative externalities that have created political alienation, rising anger, and deepening grievances. Left unaddressed or answered with heavy-handed repression, such a rising tide of unrest could morph into a web of localized confrontations. Absent corruption, the state might meet or crush such challenges individually and prevent them from flowing into a broader, more unified rebellion. Widespread and worsening corruption, however, has hollowed out the state and weakened the security forces. At some juncture, the thesis thus contends, a random event will trigger an escalating cascade of unrest in the face of which the security forces may either crumble or, even worse, turn their guns on the regime, as happened in Romania in 1989. As simmering unrest gives way to mounting turmoil in the streets and the security forces begin to lose control, the leadership will allegedly split as the "moderate" throw their lot in with the rebels, believing they can ride the tide of revolt, while "hardliners" desperately battle to avert political collapse. The coming collapse thesis actually rests on a fairly conventional description of how moribund authoritarian regimes fail. As such, its primary flaw is that it gets reduced to a simplistic, deterministic model in which collapse is treated as an inevitable outcome but one whose timing cannot be predicted with any certainty. The thesis thus ends up asserting that the CCP will collapse at some point in an ever-shifting future.

The literature on contentious politics clearly cautions against such determinism, and makes clear that the dynamics of unrest are complex and the outcome of collapse is highly contingent. First, grievance, alienation, and anger are present in all societies and must reach some ill-defined "threshold" before they become a necessary but not sufficient precondition for a transition from latent discontent and scattered, short-lived protests to large-scale open unrest. Second, "unrest" is not necessarily a singular phenomenon that can be collapsed into a crude catchall descriptor of diverse grievances and challenges to the status quo. Third, transitions from latent discontent to open confrontations between state and society are contingent on the ability of those most disaffected to frame broadly held but diffuse grievances into a coherent narrative of rebellion. Fourth, how the regime reacts to incipient dissent matters. Political authorities' response may, however, also fuel popular anger and a widening of anti-regime demonstrations. Fifth, regime capacity affects a regime's response to challenges and the effectiveness of its response.

In conclusion, there is considerable evidence that China is "unstable" and that the extent of turbulence has increased since the 1990s. Rising unrest, worsening corruption, and nagging subversion could lead to the collapse of the CCP-dominated regime. But collapse is only one of many possible outcomes. Whether the CCP collapses depends on a hierarchy of alternatives. Are grievances stimulated by the state framed into a popular narrative of oppression and injustice? Are dissident leaders able to convince the masses to take to the streets or do the masses remain passive? Does the state respond to stirrings of dissent and unrest with conciliation, negotiation, or repression? If the state represses dissent, does it crush it, drive it deep underground, or inflame greater anger and dissent? If citizens take to the streets, do the police stand by or do they attack the protesters? If the police attack, do protestors flee or do they fight? If protesters resist, do protests morph into riots? If riots erupt, are the police able to restore order or does the violence spiral out of control? As the situation deteriorates, do the police stand firm or do they flee? As order collapses, does the leadership close ranks or does it split apart? Does the army come to the rescue or does it defect? And, more critically, does the leadership have the will to hang onto power at any cost? The key question is thus not whether the CCP faces a potentially fatal revolt from below at some ill-defined future point, but rather: (1) how do corruption, unrest, and subversion evolve and interact; and (2) how does the state respond to turbulence and pressure from the streets?

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