

China's Governance in the "New Era" of Xi Jinping

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Xi Jinping: Political Career, Governance, and Leadership, 1953–2018. By Alfred L. Chan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 710p. \$54.00 cloth.

The Political Thought of Xi Jinping. By Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 280p. \$29.95 cloth.

The Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China. By Minxin Pei. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024. 321p. \$35.00 cloth.

Wuhan: How the COVID-19 Outbreak in China Spiraled Out of Control. By Dali L. Yang. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 392p. \$35.00 cloth.

The dramatic shifts in policies and practices of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the course of its tumultuous 75-year history underscore the decisive importance of political leadership. Institutionally, China closely resembles other former and surviving Communist regimes. Operationally, however, its dynamic patterns of governance reflect the shifting concerns of a succession of visionary Communist Party leaders.

Having already logged a dozen years as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping's own lifespan now imposes the only definitive endpoint on his tenure. In terms of both endurance and impact, Xi's rule promises to rival that of the two most consequential previous leaders of the PRC: Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao was of course the celebrated victor of the Communist revolution. His stirring declaration in 1949 that China had at last "stood up" as a sovereign nation signaled the start of a new chapter in which the PRC would emerge from a "century of humiliation" to chart its own proud path forward. Deng was less ostentatiously charismatic than his predecessor, but he was the acknowledged architect of the stunning post-Mao reforms that would lift millions out of poverty and afford China the fastest sustained economic growth any country has ever achieved. Not to be outdone by his illustrious forebears, Xi Jinping dubs his own reign a "New Era" in which the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"—the return of China to a position of power and glory on the world stage—will precipitate a remaking of the entire international order (Elizabeth

Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the Chinese State*, 2018). If Mao pioneered the revolutionary road and Deng forged an alternative reformist approach, how then should we understand governance in the "New Era" of Xi Jinping? Is it in fact a different approach from previous leaders of the PRC? Does it require a new framework of analysis? The four books under review, all written by senior political scientists known for many insightful contributions to the study of China's governance from Mao's day to the present, offer somewhat different answers to these questions from different perspectives: biography, ideology, information management, and information mismanagement.

Fragmented Authoritarianism

Since the Deng Xiaoping era, the dominant framework developed by Western political scientists to analyze China's governance has been that of "fragmented authoritarianism" (Kenneth Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, 1992; Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures and Processes*, 1988). The concept refers to the complicated bureaucratic bargaining that takes place within the Chinese political system among myriad actors and agencies pursuing conflicting interests. The involvement in the policy process of a multitude of officials, commissions, ministries, and departments at different levels of both party and government hierarchies required compromise in decision making and generated sectoral

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and regional disparities in the interpretation and implementation of central policy. The growth of civil society during the reform period further expanded and diversified this complex process by allowing an influential voice for NGO activists, investigative journalists, human rights lawyers, and other non-state "policy entrepreneurs" (Andrew Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Policy Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process," *The China Quarterly*, 200, 2009).

"Fragmented authoritarianism" was linked in the political science literature to a litany of bureaucratic pathologies. Lower-level cadres could slow walk higher-level directives or withhold crucial information to shield their own jurisdictions from unwelcome interference, for example. Equally problematic, official corruption could thrive in this environment. But at the same time, scholars observed that the resulting decentralization and diversity could also encourage local experimentation and render elements of the state surprisingly responsive to societal demands. To some, the resilience of Communist rule in China seemed attributable in part to the flexibility and adaptability enabled by administrative fragmentation.

From the standpoint of a central Chinese leadership anxious to impose control, fragmented authoritarianism presented obvious frustrations. Xi Jinping's governance model is designed to remedy the perceived shortcomings of the unwieldy system he inherited. Viewing these problems as a product of the post-Mao reform era, Xi reached back to the Mao period for inspiration to resolve them. The goal was to replace "fragmented authoritarianism" with what we might call instead a "fused authoritarianism" in which the Party leader, revered for his infallible Thought, commands the full loyalty of a reunified, disciplined, and reinvigorated Communist Party. To that end, advanced surveillance technology would be blended with much older methods of grassroots monitoring to give the party-state unparalleled power over society. To what extent have these aspirations been realized under Xi Jinping? And what does Xi's "New Era" portend for regime resilience?

Biography

Perhaps because it was published earlier than the other books and does not cover the traumatic period of the COVID-19 crisis or the historic 20th Party Congress when Xi Jinping shattered the post-Mao convention of retiring after a decade as Party leader, Alfred L. Chan's informative biography presents a relatively favorable evaluation of Xi's governance record that strives to strike a balanced and nuanced tone. From the outset, *Xi Jinping: Political Career, Governance, and Leadership, 1953–2018* emphasizes that "the governance of China is a complex matter, and Xi's rule exhibits both progressive and regressive features" (p. 1). In the end, Chan offers a guarded

assessment: "the jury is still out for Xi's entire career ... the more grandiose of Xi's initiatives will take years, even decades to come to fruition ..." (p. 531).

Chan's massive 700-page biography is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. Part I is a detailed narrative of Xi's experiences prior to becoming General Secretary, while Part II zeroes in on Xi Jinping's major undertakings during his first 5 years as head of the CCP, from the 18th Party Congress of 2012 to the 19th Party Congress of 2017. As with his earlier book on Mao Zedong and the Great Leap Forward (Alfred L. Chan *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward*, 2001), Chan attributes ambitious policy initiatives to the inclinations and determination of the top leader.

Drawing on a wide array of primary and secondary sources in Chinese and English, Chan paints a compelling portrait of Xi Jinping as a seasoned and savvy survivor who managed to avoid offending other influential stakeholders while patiently yet methodically making his way across and up the fragmented party-state hierarchy to the apex of the political system. Over the course of serving in different capacities in diverse and far-flung locations, from the impoverished Shaanxi countryside to cosmopolitan Shanghai, Xi evolved into a resolute Leninist for whom robust Communist Party control would be the *sine qua non* of national (and personal) survival and strength.

The son of a revolutionary-turned-reformer who suffered greatly during Mao's Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping was initially assumed by many to be poised to carry forward his father's progressive penchant for economic experimentation. But, while Xi has never repudiated Deng Xiaoping's agenda of "reform and opening," it soon became clear that bolstering the CCP ranked higher on his priority list than buoying the post-Mao market economy. "Rejuvenating the Chinese nation" would require above all solidifying the control of the CCP and its top leader.

Xi's ambitious party-building initiative calls for a rectification of membership ranks to enhance the party's internal discipline as well as its domination over society at large. This objective has given rise to the most wide-ranging and long-lived anti-corruption campaign in Chinese history. To date, more than 4 million cadres have been sanctioned in an aggressive effort that shows no signs of abating. Party building a la Xi Jinping not only involves punishing and purging those deemed guilty of malfeasance; as Mao Zedong already recognized decades earlier, successful leadership also demands serious attention to ideology. "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," as the evolving Party ideology is officially named, instructs the Party and the people to unite behind their leader in support of elevating the Chinese nation to its rightful place in the world.

Governance in the “New Era” does not rely upon party discipline or ideology alone. The PRC invests heavily in cutting-edge technology to buttress its “stability maintenance” regime. While many of its control mechanisms can be traced back to earlier state practices, the combination of old approaches with new high-tech methods of collecting information and countering opposition affords Xi Jinping what is said to be the most powerful domestic security apparatus in the world.

Xi has streamlined central command of this complex system by reorganizing the entire governing structure to vest ultimate responsibility for priority policies with top-level coordination entities once known as Leading Small Groups (subsequently renamed Central Commissions). Xi himself chairs many of these secretive commissions, whose purpose is to cut through the bureaucratic morass of competing agencies and territorial jurisdictions for which China’s sprawling “fragmented authoritarianism” was known.

Although Chan credits Xi’s reform efforts with concentrating decision-making authority in the Party and in Xi personally, he concedes that the results are far from uniform: “for all its centralizing pretensions, the Chinese system is not monolithic—in certain respects power is so highly decentralized and diffused that observers have labeled the Chinese system fragmented or disjointed authoritarianism” (p. 266). Central policies are still evaded at lower levels and “Xi has often denounced bureaucracy for ‘disobeying orders and defying prohibitions’” (p. 267).

While Chan acknowledges the continued fragmentation of Chinese governance, he criticizes the various factional politics approaches that have often complemented the fragmented authoritarianism framework. Scholars have pointed to the Petroleum Gang, Shanghai Gang, Princelings, Communist Youth League, Tsinghua University network, and other shared backgrounds and connections in an attempt to identify axes of cooperation and conflict. Chan stresses instead the cross-cutting nature of elite alliances and allegiances and dismisses arguments (Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*, 2016) that Xi Jinping and (Premier) Li Keqiang once represented competing factions—“elite” versus “populist”— vying for the supreme leadership position (pp. 157ff).

Chan also rejects the idea that Xi is a transactional leader, content to appease the self-interest of ordinary Chinese, proposing instead that “Xi’s inclinations for ambitious projects to transform and the courage to take on unpopular and risky policies places him nearer the transformative leader pole” (p. 531). Yet, despite this generally sympathetic portrait, Chan admits that recent events may have cast a darker shadow over Xi’s governance record: “the lasting impact of the coronavirus pandemic . . . is outside the scope of this book. However, it does make an

objective and sober evaluation of the China experience even more difficult” (p. 13).

Ideology

This darker period is the focus of *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* by Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, which covers Xi’s second term as General Secretary—from the announcement of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialist Thought with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 through the publication of the fourth volume of Xi’s pronouncements on governance 5 years later. The book begins with the dramatic scene at the closing session of the 20th Party Congress of 2022 when Xi Jinping’s predecessor as General Secretary, Hu Jintao, was unceremoniously ushered out of the proceedings against his will. Observing that this public humiliation of a retired top leader “damaged the image of Xi and the CCP system,” Tsang and Cheung argue that such a bold action was possible only because of the prior acceptance of Xi Thought as the official “operating system” of the CCP-state (pp. 1–2). Bolstering the prowess of the Communist Party and consolidating Xi’s own power as the Party’s “core” had become “two sides of the same coin under Xi Thought” (p. 66).

Like Maoism, Xi Thought is an effort to render Marxist–Leninist ideology suitable to the Chinese context. However, unlike Mao Zedong’s adaptation of Marxism–Leninism to the *actual* contemporary conditions of China, which elevated the peasantry to the role of revolutionary vanguard, Xi invokes *ancient* Chinese principles in a bid to enhance cultural familiarity and legitimacy. Accordingly, Tsang and Cheung distinguish Xi’s “Sino-Centric Marxism–Leninism” from Mao’s “Sinified Marxism–Leninism.” Xi Thought, with its frequent references to Confucian and Legalist precepts of statecraft, is designed to instill pride in the pedigree of a culturally distinct Chinese model of governance that poses a credible alternative to “Western values.” Allusions to age-old precepts notwithstanding, Xi Thought is intended as the roadmap toward a future that will culminate in the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (i.e., the fulfillment of what Xi has dubbed the “China Dream” of restoring China’s historical grandeur and international standing) by 2050—one year after the centennial anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1949.

Tsang and Cheung provide an informative overview of the evolution and maturation of Xi Thought, which they describe as still a “proto-ideology.” Supported by an immense, generously funded infrastructure of new research institutes, grant programs, academic degrees, online courses, publications, broadcasts, mobile apps, and mandatory classroom instruction from kindergarten through university, the promulgation and popularization of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” is now a major priority of the

Ministry of Education as well as the Department of Propaganda. The intended audience is not only domestic. A four-volume series of Xi's speeches and writings, published between 2014 and 2022 under the title *The Governance of China*, has already been translated into dozens of foreign languages.

The authors' analysis of Xi's pronouncements on governance relies on software packages as well as their own readings of the original Chinese versions to identify key words and phrases that they then compare to the utterances of former party leaders. They conclude that the post-Mao system of governance developed under the aegis of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao—which Steve Tsang previously labeled “consultative Leninism” (Steve Tsang, “Consultative Leninism: China's New Political Framework,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18(62), 2009)—has been substantially recast by Xi Jinping to include an assertive quest for global acclaim that merits the new label of “Sino-centric consultative Leninism” (pp. 34ff). By “consultative,” the authors do not mean that the process either was or is democratic, but rather that the Party—in conformity with Mao's Mass Line—must solicit, and to some extent satisfy, the desires of the public if it is to maintain control in a rapidly changing environment. Lacking the ballot box of a democratic system, mass surveillance plays a critical role in the Chinese state's effort to gauge popular opinion. Tsang and Cheung stress, however, that in contrast to the type of “consultative Leninism” practiced by his immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi (again stealing a page from Mao's playbook) has substituted his own autocratic decision making for collective deliberation by the Politburo Standing Committee.

It was widely accepted that the Communist Party which Xi Jinping took over in 2012 was beset by serious problems of corruption and indiscipline that had intensified in tandem with the post-Mao economic reforms. Xi's response was to resuscitate and consolidate methods of Party rectification and strongman rule pioneered in the early years of the PRC by Head of State Liu Shaoqi and Party Chairman Mao Zedong, respectively. Xi believed that the combination of a reinvigorated party and robust leader was necessary to realize the ultimate goal of the Chinese revolution—the revival of national glory. Tsang and Cheung emphasize that the formulation of Xi Thought plays a key part in eliding any distinction between the interests of the Party and those of its top leader: “Xi's vision is a Leninist party with the core leader exercising supreme and effective control over the party machinery” (p. 63). Moreover, in the authors' view, Xi has already succeeded in implementing much of this vision, having “centralized powers to an extent unseen since Chairman Mao” (p. 7).

The authoritarian fusion of Party and leader carries serious downsides, however. According to Tsang and

Cheung, the Chinese party-state has devolved into an echo chamber where the policy contestation and experimentation of an earlier era have been supplanted by perfunctory lip service to Xi Thought and performative compliance with Party directives. Moreover, even where Xi Thought is zealously implemented—as in the forced assimilation to the “great Chinese nation” of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang—the negative consequences can be grave. The authors conclude with an ominous warning of descent from strongman rule into outright dictatorship should the Chinese economy continue to falter (pp. 209–210).

Information Management

By Minxin Pei's account, the PRC is already a dictatorship. In *The Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China*, Pei delineates the exceptionally sophisticated system of covert and overt intelligence gathering that the PRC deploys to keep tabs on its citizens. Pei labels the Chinese system of information collection a form of “distributed surveillance,” in which responsibilities and costs are borne by “various security bureaucracies, other state actors, and nonstate actors, with coordination performed by a specialized party bureaucracy—the CCP's political-legal committees” (p. 23).

As Pei explains, the party's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLC) and its local branches served as domestic security nodes starting from the 1980s. Shortly after Xi took office, in an effort to combat bureaucratic fragmentation he created a new Central National Security Commission that he himself chaired. But rather than replace the extant CPLC bureaucracy, Xi made it a major target of his anti-corruption campaign, leading to what Pei describes as possibly “the most thorough purge of the coercive apparatus since the end of the Cultural Revolution” (p. 85). The goal was to gain greater control over the CPLC and its local affiliates, while at the same time deepening its reach into the countryside by expanding political-legal committees (PLCs) from the county level down to the township. Pei, whose previous books (Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*, 2006; Minxin Pei, *China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay*, 2016) explored rampant corruption and political stagnation in the pre-Xi reform period, credits Xi's upgrading of the PLCs with a significant contribution toward sustaining Communist Party rule: “The increased political heft and security responsibilities of the party's PLCs at all levels illustrates the CCP's skillful application of Leninist organizational principles in confronting emerging threats to its power” (p. 95).

A major function of the PLCs is to oversee the “grid governance” program that divides Chinese communities into digital matrices of several hundred households, each outfitted with surveillance cameras and monitored by

employees of the local neighborhood or village committee charged with submitting real-time reports on any observed anomalies. The grids became the grassroots foundation of Xi's stringent Zero Covid policy, used to register and verify residents' health codes, enforce mandatory quarantines and lockdowns, and manage vaccination drives, mass testing, and community disinfection (pp. 65–66).

Even before the pandemic, grid management—together with other surveillance mechanisms—were deployed to keep track of individuals considered a threat to social order. Drawing on the author's interviews with exiled dissidents and activists, *The Sentinel State* provides valuable detail on the surveillance system from the targets' own perspective. Since the state's aim is to prevent protests and disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place, the process of gathering intelligence—via neighborhood informants and plainclothes police, wire taps, cell phone tracking, and the collection of DNA information, for example—is often conducted quite openly. But such overt methods are complemented by a range of less visible means—from the Ministry of Public Security's Golden Shield and Skynet programs to the CPLC-funded Sharp Eyes initiative—that link cyber and video monitoring to a massive repository of big data.

The part of China's information collection effort that has perhaps attracted the greatest notice outside the country is Xi's promotion of a so-called “social credit” program by which the state assigns numerical scores to citizens based on their demonstrated behavior and political loyalty. In theory, these scores are tied to various rewards and punishments intended to encourage public compliance with state priorities. Although the project is still in an experimental stage, Pei observes that “the social credit system has unmatched potential as a surveillance tool because of the vast amounts of personal data collected, stored, and analyzed under its aegis” (p. 235).

In reflecting upon the relative resilience of the Chinese Communist state, Pei argues that the PRC “does possess the most advanced surveillance technologies among all dictatorships” (p. 241). Yet he stresses that technological superiority alone cannot explain China's success at “stability maintenance” in the decades following the Tiananmen Uprising and the collapse of Central European Communism in 1989: “If China is the global power closest to the dystopic Orwellian ideal, it is not because it has adopted high-tech tools. It is because it has the human infrastructure needed to make good use of these tools” (p. 237).

Pei's core argument—that the singular capacity of the Chinese surveillance system is attributable less to new technological advancements than to the contributions of human informants and other labor-intensive infrastructure inherited from the past—is also a central theme in Martin Dimitrov's pathbreaking comparative study (2022) of surveillance in China and Communist

Bulgaria—reviewed in this journal by Lucan Way (see Lucan Way, “Review of *Dictatorship and Information, Perspectives on Politics*, 21(3), 2023). Like Dimitrov, Pei plumbs difficult-to-access internal documents as well as more accessible gazetteers and yearbooks to sketch a remarkably revealing picture of the architecture of China's surveillance regime. The substantial empirical and analytical correspondence between Dimitrov's landmark study and Pei's more recent book lends credibility to their characterizations of an otherwise opaque intelligence apparatus.

In addition to an extensive network of informants, Pei highlights the key coordination role of the powerful specialized party bureaucracy that oversees and coordinates the surveillance apparatus: “the political–legal committees, under the umbrella of the Central Political–Legal Committee” (p. 241). Looking ahead, however, he warns that the greatest threat to the Party's continued rule could turn out to be a growing reliance on its coercive “neo-Stalinist rule under Xi Jinping.” He concludes with an admonition: “The CCP would be well advised that the heaviest hand is also the weakest” (p. 247).

Information Mismanagement

A graphic account of how the heavy hand of the Chinese surveillance system can translate into serious vulnerabilities is presented in Dali L. Yang's engrossing case study, *Wuhan: How the COVID-19 Outbreak in China Spiraled Out of Control*. Yang posits that “[t]he measure of an organization or system is how it processes and uses information and what information it ignores” (p. 7). By that metric, China's response to COVID-19 was a colossal failure. The Chinese state's formidable capacity not just to collect, but also to censor and conceal, critical information impeded its response to a crisis that might otherwise have been managed much more expeditiously and effectively.

This is a sobering analysis by a scholar of the Chinese bureaucracy whose previous book on Chinese state building (Dali L. Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China*, 2004) offered a notably positive assessment of post-Tiananmen governance reforms that had promised to ameliorate if not eradicate the affliction of fragmented authoritarianism. Twenty years later, moved by the tragic trajectory of the COVID-19 crisis, Yang chronicles in painstaking detail how the interplay of parochial bureaucratic interests led to the mishandling of sensitive information and escalated what might well have been a contained local epidemic into a global pandemic.

On the eve of the pandemic, Yang explains, the city of Wuhan had attained national recognition as a model of good governance, designated a pacesetter in combining grid management and grassroots party building (p. 257). In Yang's study, as in Pei's, the CPLC is spotlighted for its role in “the nationwide promotion of grid governance,

which integrates digital technologies with community monitoring and surveillance of neighborhoods and villages" (p. 31). In December 2019—just as the coronavirus was starting to circulate—CPLC selected Wuhan as the site for its first national work conference on urban governance modernization to showcase the city's advanced techniques of intelligence collection and social control. Wuhan had also recently been honored by the National Health Commission as a "national healthy city"—hard-won vindication of an intense 5-year effort by the Wuhan leadership to improve the city's record of disease control and public sanitation (p. 98).

Metropolitan rankings and performance evaluations are the coin of the realm in Chinese bureaucratic governance, thanks to previous administrative reforms, and local officials' success in meeting national standards is critical not only for unlocking state resources to develop their jurisdictions but also for improving their own prospects of promotion to higher office. Yang explains that Wuhan's mayor, hopeful of being rewarded for his recent performance with a major career advancement, had incentive to silence the whistle-blowing doctors and other health care professionals who sought to alert the public when they became aware of a serious respiratory illness spreading in their midst. As a result of local bureaucratic interests and pressure, the state-of-the-art National Notifiable Disease Surveillance System that had been introduced at considerable expense in the wake of the SARS epidemic 20 years earlier was not activated; the director of the Chinese Centers for Disease Control learned of the novel coronavirus outbreak only belatedly through social media posts (p. 68). Precious time was lost, citizens were not properly warned of the growing danger, and the disease spiraled out of control.

Other tools of state surveillance were then leveraged in a desperate attempt to contain the outbreak. In response to a directive from Xi Jinping, grid governance was converted to this purpose. The 76-day lockdown of more than 10 million Wuhan residents, overseen by a Central Steering Group in which the Secretary General of CPLC took a leading part, utilized Wuhan's model system of grid management to enforce the strict home confinement. The citizens' response was impressive, attesting to the overwhelming power of the Chinese state: "Chinese society complied ... with a level of acquiescence and discipline ... difficult to achieve in other parts of the world ... The intensification of community-level efforts ... became a campaign for the party-state to exercise its unrivaled capacity to dominate society at the grassroots level" (p. 277).

Draconian as the lockdown was, it could not eliminate a virus that had already spread well beyond its confines. Yang blames the inability to contain the outbreak on insidious problems inherent to China's governance practice: "Operating within a political-administrative structure that

suppressed information and particularly discussions of potential risks, dismissed anomalies, and discouraged proactive measures, the viral spread in Wuhan and beyond Wuhan seemed almost predestined" (pp. 280–281). He stresses the Chinese leadership's obsession with stability maintenance and its deleterious effects on crisis response (pp. 100ff).

Rather than attribute these problems to the "fused" governance approach of Xi Jinping, however, Yang points instead to the lingering scourge of fragmented authoritarianism: "Contrary to popular perceptions of China under the centralized control of the party-state under Xi Jinping, the underlying fault lines and tensions of fragmented authoritarianism ... significantly weakened the health emergency response." The result of these systemic governance problems was "deliberate concealment, distortions, and blockages in epidemic information flows; defensive avoidance by organizational leaders; shirking of responsibility; and efforts to assign or shift blame to other authorities" (p. 280).

According to Yang, then, bureaucratic and territorial fragmentation was the root cause of the buck-passing and blame shifting that hobbled China's response to the crisis, underscoring the urgent need for proactive central leadership. He quotes with sympathy Xi's lament at the height of the pandemic: "I write my instructions to guard the last line of defense; if I don't give instructions will [these officials] not do any work at all?" (p. 288).

Concluding Thoughts

So how new is the "New Era" of Xi Jinping, after all? If Dali Yang, who discarded the fragmented authoritarianism framework 20 years ago on grounds that the Chinese political system had advanced to an improved mode of governance, now feels compelled to revisit the framework, is that because China has recently regressed or because its governance model never fundamentally changed?

The books under review put forward different answers. Recounting Xi Jinping's eventful biography, Albert Chan commends Xi's "transformative leadership." Reviewing the repressive surveillance regimen that Xi upgraded, Minxin Pei condemns his "neo-Stalinist rule." Focusing on ideology, Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung suggest that Xi's attempted fusion of Party and leader under Xi Thought generated a bureaucratic echo chamber in which grassroots initiative has been stifled. Looking at information mismanagement, Dali Yang attributes the "defensive avoidance mode" of Chinese officials during COVID-19 to persisting central-local tensions dating to the early reform era. Adjudicating among these interpretations calls for attention to the different vantage points of the authors.

Understandably, due to the difficulties of obtaining credible data, the views of ordinary Chinese citizens do not figure centrally in these assessments of Xi's governance

record. Yet popular appraisals of Xi Jinping and his project to rejuvenate the Chinese nation will surely play a significant role in deciding the fate of Xi's proclaimed "New Era." Public opinion surveys conducted in China are not permitted to ask about the top leader himself, but polls conducted prior to the pandemic consistently reported high levels of political satisfaction that scholars interpreted as a key pillar of China's authoritarian resilience (Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability*, 2016; Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jesse Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time*,

2020). A battery of surveys conducted more recently by sociologist Martin Whyte and economist Scott Rozelle indicate a much less satisfied public, however. Post-COVID-19 respondents express significantly more discontent and less optimism about both their own and their country's prospects than was true in the past (Ilaria Mazzocco and Scott Kennedy, "Is It Me or the Economic System? Changing Evaluations of Inequality in China," *Big Data China*, 2024). The pervasive pessimism and anxiety about the future that is observable among the Chinese public today suggest that the nation is feeling far from rejuvenated.