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Generations, Geography, and Governance in China: Avenues to Authoritarian Acceptance

Chapter One: Explaining regime acceptance and resistance

Against the backdrop of global democratic regression, China's seemingly resilient Chinese Communist Party-led regime is an important case study. This book sheds new light on the sources of popular acceptance of authoritarian governance in China, focusing on a dimension not found in other works: the divergent formative experiences, values, comparative reference points, and political expectations of China's major generational and geographic groups. Drawing on public opinion surveys, qualitative interviews by domestic and foreign scholars, NGO reports, and Chinese government statistical sources, the book identifies two key requirements for a group to push for regime change: (1) recognition of desirable and viable political alternatives; (2) perception that group members' deserved wellbeing is not being facilitated by a government whose responsibility it is to serve them. In the case of the People's Republic of China, these requirements have been met only during the early reform period (late 1970s-1989), and only for two relatively small generational-geographic groups. More broadly, the book finds that multiple experiential avenues can lead to popular acceptance of authoritarian rule, while the confluence of factors leading to public promotion of political liberalization appears unusual and ephemeral.

Across the globe, political authoritarianism has been on the rise and liberal democratic principles and practices have been questioned and imperiled—even in established democracies such as the United States. Alarm bells have been sounded, with prominent works chronicling *How Democracies Die,* and *The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*.[1] In a July 2022 *New York*

[1] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (NY: Viking, 2018); Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (NY: Doubleday, 2021). See also Larry Diamond, "Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes," *Democratization* 28:1 (2020): 22-42.

Times/Siena College poll of American voters from across the ideological and demographic spectrums, 58 percent reported believing their system of government does not work. The "lack of faith" in American democracy was particularly pronounced in younger respondents aged 18-29, nearly half of whom "said voting did not make a difference in how their government operates."[2]

For those seeking to understand these phenomena, China is a key case. It has been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uninterruptedly since 1949, standing as one of the few nominally "communist" regimes left in the world. Based on Leninist principles, the CCP claims to represent the Chinese people and has encouraged both institutionalized and non-institutionalized popular input, while simultaneously maintaining undeniable political control. In the decades following China's "red" period under radical CCP leader Mao Zedong (1949-1976), the Party incorporated demographic groups that were castigated and punished under Mao, established local-level elections, and opened China's economy to the global capitalist system. Yet, as during the Maoist era, the CCP has kept a tight grip on power. Under current CCP General Secretary and PRC president Xi Jinping (in power since late 2012 and showing no sign of stepping down as of this writing) the Chinese polity has in many respects become increasingly authoritarian.

The most puzzling aspect of these developments: over the course of the post-Mao era, most mainland Chinese citizens have seemed to increasingly accept, rather than oppose, CCP rule—while simultaneously becoming less publicly contentious about political issues yet highly so

[2] Reid Epstein, "As Faith Flags in U.S. Government, Many Voters Want to Upend the System," *New York Times*, July 13, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/us/politics/government-trust-voting-poll.html

about material concerns. During the late 1970s-1980s (China's "early reform era") large numbers of Chinese citizens repeatedly, collectively, and publicly pressed for greater liberalization of the political system. Such actions include the April 1976 Tiananmen movement, the Democracy Wall movement of 1978-1980, the student protests of 1986-1987, and the massive and sustained student-led movement of spring 1989. In contrast, from 1990 through late 2022 (China's "late reform era") there were no cases of street protests on the Chinese mainland including demands for political liberalization, and just two very small-scale actions calling for democratic political change [efforts to form an opposition party (the China Democracy Party) in 1998, and publication of an online manifesto (Charter 08) in 2008].[3] Yet meanwhile during the late reform era, millions of Chinese citizens have participated in hundreds of thousands of protests focused on material local issues—such as villagers unfairly compensated for land acquisitions, private sector workers owed unpaid wages, and residents suffering from environmental degradation caused by waste incinerators.[4]

In late 2022, this post-1990 norm of only localized, materially-focused street protest was punctured. The key contextual change was the PRC's increasingly draconian "Zero Covid" policies in response to the highly contagious Omicron variant, which caused excessive and serious collateral damage (such as inability to get food or medicine) and contrasted sharply with an outside world that largely had returned to normal life. In an October-November 2022

[3] This statement excludes mass public protests in Hong Kong and Tibet, both of which have centered on demands for regional political autonomy.
[4] See Teresa Wright, ed., *Handbook of Protest and Resistance in China* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

online survey of urban users, nearly 45 percent of respondents had been quarantined, and reported lower trust in central and local governments as a result.[5]

On October 13, just three days prior to the start of the CCP's 20th National Party Congress (where top Party leader Xi Jinping was expected to be endorsed for an unprecedented third term), a 48-year-old man hung banners on the Sìtōng (四通) bridge in Beijing, creating smoke to draw attention and shouting slogans through a megaphone. His words were bold and political: "Food, not Covid tests; freedom, not lockdowns; dignity, not lies; reform, not cultural revolution; elections, not rulers; citizens, not slaves. Students and workers strike to remove the traitor Xi Jinping." Even the student protestors of 1989 had not used such inflammatory anti-regime language. Overseas and online, cell phone videos taken by onlookers circulated and the "bridge man's" slogans widely copied, morphing into a panoply of creative and critical memes. Within mainland China, the slogans were scrawled in bathroom stalls and anonymously airdropped on crowded subways and in other public areas. However, students and workers did not heed the call to strike, and no collective actions appeared.[6]

Then suddenly in late November 2022, citizens in cities across the country took to the streets in protest. The proximate cause was an apartment fire in the far eastern city of Urumqi, where residents had perished when firefighters were hindered by physical barriers erected as part of the CCP's "Zero Covid" measures. Though most criticisms focused on the government's exceedingly harsh implementation of pandemic-related restrictions and testing requirements,

[5] Harris Doshay, Lei Guang, Yanchuan Liu, and Young Yang, "How (Un)popular is Covid-Zero?" UCSD China Data Lab, https://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/viz-blog/how-unpopular-is-covid-zero/#.
[6] See Lili Pike, "'Depose the traitorous despot': How China's 'Bridge Man' unleashed a global protest against Xi Jinping," *Grid News*, Oct. 21, 2022.

in some locations demonstrators demanded freedom of expression (with many holding blank sheets of paper to articulate this idea), and in a few isolated cases called for top CCP leader Xi Jinping and the CCP as a whole to step down (下台;xiatai).

In important ways, the late 2022 anti-Zero Covid protests were unlike the myriad localized and materially-focused protests appearing from 1990 through the present—and like the massive student-led protests calling for political liberalization in spring 1989. In both late 2022 and spring 1989, demonstrations emerged in numerous cities, focused on the same issue, targeted central Party leaders, and included calls for political liberalization and systemic political change. They also involved city residents from various walks of life, including university students and blue-collar workers.[7] Given these similarities, many wonder if public acceptance of CCP is on the wane.

In the short term, however, the central government's response to the late 2022 pandemic-related protests seems to have ameliorated public concerns. Like the common materially-focused protests arising since 1990 (and unlike the regime's violent crackdown on the protests of 1989), the late 2022 protests received little to no official media coverage or acknowledgement by central CCP leaders. Also as in most post-1990 protests, local authorities detained and threatened individuals identified as protest leaders yet treated regular participants as well-intended and non-threatening. In addition, central authorities criticized

[7] See Teresa Wright, "China's Short-Lived Zero-COVID Protests Could Have a Lasting Impact," *World Politics Review*, Dec. 14, 2022. https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/protests-china-covid-lockdown-tiananmen-square/ and Teresa Wright, "Protests in China are not rare—but the current unrest is significant," *The Conversation*, Nov. 30, 2022. https://theconversation.com/protests-in-china-are-not-rare-but-the-current-unrest-is-significant-195622

local officials for violating or skewing beneficent national policies.[8] But most importantly, the Zero Covid policy criticized by the protestors was promptly abandoned. Though many citizens feared the health consequences of such an abrupt and unplanned-for shift, the regime proved responsive to public grievances. Since then, mainland citizens have mounted no further public protests calling for political liberalization. Meanwhile, dozens of more localized protests focusing on material issues—the kind typical of protest since 1990—have occurred.[9]

Meanwhile, public opinion survey data present a somewhat blurry picture of popular trust in CCP governance. Numerous surveys suggest high and growing trust, even under the more authoritarian leadership of Xi Jinping. For example, from 2003-2016 the Ash Center at Harvard conducted eight waves of in-person surveys, each involving roughly 3000 respondents chosen from a nationally representative sample. In the Center's last survey undertaken in 2016, 95.5 percent of respondents reported being "relatively" or "highly" satisfied with China's central government. Moreover, the Ash Center surveys find that from 2003-2016 "Chinese citizen satisfaction with government…increased virtually across the board."[10] Similar results have been reported by researchers at UCSD's China Data, who conducted nationally representative online surveys of roughly 1000 urban residents from 2018 through May 2020.

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[8] See Wright, "China's Short-Lived" and Wright "Protests in China."

[9] For example, in late December 2022 and early January 2023 tens of thousands of workers at Covid supply manufacturers in two cities protested over mass layoffs and wage discrepancies, and in early January 2023 sanitation workers in multiple cities mounted protests over wage arrears. See China Labour Bulletin, "January 2023 labour news roundup: The effects of the post-Zero Covid economy on China's workers," *China Labour Bulletin*, Feb 13, 2023. https://clb.org.hk/content/january-2023-labour-news-roundup-effects-post-zero-covid-economy-china%E2%80%99s-workers

[10] Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel, "Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time," *Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation* (2020): 1.

Results from their 2019-2020 surveys show that "on a scale of 1 to 10, the average level of trust in the central government—already high—increased from 8.23 in June 2019, to 8.65 in Feb. 2020, and to 8.87 in May 2020."[11] Other well-regarded polling organizations, such as World Public Opinion (run by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland) and the East Asia Barometer (conducted through the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica and the Institute for the Advanced Studies of Humanities and Social Sciences at National Taiwan University), have produced congruent results.

Yet scholars also recognize the limitations of public opinion surveys in authoritarian political settings and caution against taking sanguine results at face value. Studies of the reliability of Chinese public opinion data by Lei and Lu; Munro; and Stockmann, Esarey and Zhang "detect dissimulation and bias but conclude that the problems are not severe enough to invalidate survey findings."[12] Others reach more sceptical conclusions, but remain unclear on the "real" level of popular trust in the CCP-led regime.[13] Representing perhaps the most rigorous and thoughtful assessment to date, Li differentiates among trust in the commitment and the capacity of China's government at various levels (central, provincial, city, county, and

[11] Guang et al. 2020.

[12] Lianjiang Li, "Decoding Political Trust in China: A Machine Learning Analysis," *China Quarterly* 249 (March 2022): 2, citing Xuchuan Lei and Jie Lu, "Revisiting political wariness in China's public opinion surveys: experimental evidence on responses to politically sensitive questions," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26:104 (2017): 213-232; Niel Munro, "Does refusal bias influence the measurement of Chinese Political Trust?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 27:111 (2018): 457-471; Daniela Stockmann, Ashley Esarey and Jie Zhang, "Who is afraid of the Chinese state? Evidence calling into question political fear as an explanation for overreporting political trust," *Political Psychology* 39:5 (2018): 1105-1121.

[13] Li 2022, citing Kerry Ratigan and Leah Rabin, "Re-evaluating political trust: the impact of survey nonresponse in rural China," *China Quarterly* 243 (2020): 823; and Lianjiang Li, "Reassessing trust in the central government: evidence from five national surveys," *China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 115.

township). On this basis he identifies four degrees of political trust: total trust, partial trust, scepticism and total distrust. Using data from a 2006 local survey conducted in four counties, he shows that while "at first glance" nearly 71 percent of respondents appear to trust the central government, his more nuanced approach reveals that only about 21 percent have "total trust," 48 percent have "partial trust," and 24 percent are "sceptical." More negatively, Li's analysis of 2011 Asian Barometer Survey data finds only about 18 percent of respondents evidence "total trust" and 34 percent "partial trust," while 33 percent display "scepticism," and 14 percent "total distrust."

These mixed findings regarding popular trust in CCP governance are further complicated by Chinese respondents' expressed support for politically liberal values such as freedom of expression and assembly. For example, in data conducted online in 2018-2019 by Pan and Xu, roughly 58 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "the government should allow people to express their positive or negative views toward government policies;" about 25 percent were neutral; and 17 percent disagreed, strongly disagreed, or refused to answer. Regarding protest, respondents were less supportive; about 25 percent opposed limitations on "people gathering in public places and participating in demonstrations;" roughly 36 percent were neutral; and approximately 39 percent agreed or declined to answer.[14] Similarly, World Values Survey data collected in China in 2013 and 2018 showed increased trust in government alongside greater

[14] Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, "Gauging Preference Stability and Ideological Constraint under Authoritarian Rule," *21st Century China Center Research Paper*, Aug. 24, 2020.

openness to participating in peaceful demonstrations; and increased support for "people choosing their leaders in free elections" yet decreased participation in local elections.[15]

Scholars and practitioners have been intrigued by signs of popular acceptance of China's authoritarian CCP-led political system alongside support for liberal political values. Among the many studies trying to explain it, most focus on the regime's adaptability and responsiveness. Examples include Nathan's notion of "resilient authoritarianism," Shambaugh's discussion of "atrophy and adaptation," Chen's focus on "contentious authoritarianism," Lieberthal, Oksenberg and Mertha's discussion of "fragmented authoritarianism," Teets' explication of "consultative authoritarianism," and Gueorguiev's analysis of "participation without democracy."[16] Relatedly, Dickson highlights the regime's openness to input from experts and key constituencies, and its simultaneous tolerance and restriction of independent social actors.[17] Similarly, in other work I argue that in China's late reform period the CCP has satisfactorily fulfilled the basic functions of a stable governing regime through an effective combination of communist, capitalist, democratic, and authoritarian characteristics, while also becoming more open and responsive to public input and participation.[18] Further, the vast literature on popular protest in post-1989 China reveals a political system that not only allows but sympathetically responds to collective contention--even while quashing political protest aimed at central authorities.[19]

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[15] XueYing Hu and Teresa Wright, "Developments in China's Public Opinion from Hu to Xi: Corruption, Activism, and Regime Legitimacy," *China Quarterly* (First View 2023): 1-17.
[16] Gueorguiev 2021; Teets 2014; Chen 2011; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Mertha 2009; Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008.
[17] Dickson 2016.
[18] Wright 2010; Wright 2015.
[19] See, for example, Li 2019.

These China-specific arguments are further informed by examinations of authoritarian durability in other times and places. Explaining the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and former Eastern Bloc, Dimitrov emphasizes leaders' failure to adapt through reforming the economy; co-opting reform winners and losers; fostering institutions to receive and respond to citizen complaints; and reformulating party ideology—and contrasts this failure with successful adaptation in China and Vietnam.[20] Studies of authoritarian persistence also point to the role of patronage, showing how political leaders buy off key groups within the populace and potential challengers to the regime.[21] Other works examine the circumstances under which authoritarian elites succumb to or hold firm against popular pressures for political liberalization. Studying Southeast Asia, Slater focuses on political leaders' assessment of citizen unrest as endemic or episodic, and manageable or unmanageable, and thus whether their own lives and livelihoods will be better preserved under the political status quo or a new regime.[22] Looking at Mexico, Magaloni shows how in "competitive authoritarian" regimes with rigged elections, hegemonic party elites are disincentivized to defect, and citizens and opposition groups recognize the futility of challenging the system.[23] Relatedly, scholars emphasize the role of repression, and specifically the calculations and role of military and public security forces in suppressing or

[20] Martin Dimitrov "Understanding Communist Collapse and Resilience," in Dimitrov, ed., *Why Communism did not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 3-39.
[21] See for example K.M. Morrison, "Oil, nontax revenue, and the redistributional foundations of regime stability," *International Organization* 63:1 (2009): 107-138.
[22] Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Reviewed in David Art, "What Do We Know About Authoritarianism After Ten Years?" *Comparative Politics* (April 2012): 253-254.
[23] Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Reviewed in Art 2012: 352.

disincentivizing popular threats to the regime.[24] International factors also have demonstrated importance, including the strength or weakness of an authoritarian regime's economic or political ties with Western liberal democracies, and the perceived appeal of liberal democracy as an alternative to authoritarian rule.[25]

This volume sheds new light on existing analyses of regime acceptance and resistance in post-Mao China and recent developments such as the protests of late 2022. More broadly, it extends current understandings of authoritarian durability. The volume does so by focusing on an important dimension not found in other works: the divergent formative experiences, values, comparative reference points, and political expectations of China's major generational and geographic groups. In addition, this book argues that understanding contemporary public attitudes and behavior requires examination of the full span of PRC history, and not just the post-Mao era.

The volume's comparative historical analysis of China's key generational and geographic groups is informed by existing scholarly findings and theories regarding protest and collective contention; regime change and democratization; authoritarian durability; generational cohorts; and socioeconomic status—both in China and around the world. Empirically, the book draws on a wealth of data, including statistics, surveys, interviews, participant observation, and

[24] See Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics* 44:2 (Jan. 2012): 127-149; Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner, "State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability," *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (Fall/Winter 2011): 15–29; and Suzanne Scoggins, *Policing China: Street-Level Cops in the Shadow of Protest* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[25] See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

documentary/policy analyses compiled by Chinese and foreign scholars (including myself), NGOs, international organizations, and the Chinese government. Through this empirically grounded and theoretically informed study, the book provides a new lens through which to understand regime acceptance or resistance in the PRC, as well as other places and times.

Specifically, the book identifies two key requirements for a demographic group within the citizenry to push for change in political regime: (1) recognition of desirable and viable political alternatives; (2) perception that group members' deserved wellbeing is not being facilitated by a government whose responsibility it is to serve them. In the PRC, these requirements have been met only during the early reform period, and only for two relatively small generational-geographic groups within the population. In November 2022, the second requirement was met for more generational-geographic groups than has been the case at any other time in China's post-Mao history. However, these groups' perception that their deserved wellbeing was being thwarted by the regime was easily addressed by central political authorities. As a result, this perception receded quite quickly. Moreover, unlike in the early reform era, the first requirement—a clear and preferable political alternative—was not present in late 2022. As a result, isolated calls for Xi and the CCP to step down did not spread or persist.

This volume's spotlight on generation and geography in generating key demographic groups in China emanates from the two major axes of societal division in the PRC from the Mao era through the present: (a) age/generational cohort and (b) residential registration (户口; *hukou*) status.[26] Many existing studies of Chinese society point to the importance of

[26] Since 1958 each Chinese citizen has been issued a residential registration card, or hukou. Through 2014, all hukou designated the holder as "rural" or "urban."

generational differences. For the purposes of this project, three distinct cohorts are most relevant. First is China's "red generation," including individuals born in roughly 1965 or earlier and coming of age prior to the mid-1970s. At present, they are in their late 50s or older. Second, "early reform generation" citizens were born circa 1966-1980 and grew up from the mid-1970s-1980s. Currently, they are in their early 40s to late 50s in terms of age. Third, the "late reform generation" encompasses citizens born around 1981 or later and experiencing their formative years from the early 1990s on. These are China's youth, aged in their 30s or younger.

In terms of hukou status, there is widespread scholarly agreement on the two fundamental divisions within the population: rural or urban hukou categorization. Since 1958, each Chinese citizen has been issued a residential registration card, or hukou. Through 2014, all hukou designated the holder as "rural" or "urban." From the late 1950s through the present, one's family hukou categorization largely has determined one's socioeconomic and political status and opportunities.

As elaborated below and depicted in Table 1, these generational and hukou-based dividing lines give rise to six categories of citizens whose formative experiences have elicited dissimilar configurations of values, attitudes and behavior: red generation rural hukou-holders, red generation urban hukou-holders, early reform generation rural hukou-holders, early reform generation urban hukou-holders, late reform generation rural hukou-holders, and late reform generation urban hukou-holders.

Table 1

	Rural hukou	**Urban hukou**
Red generation	Red rural	Red urban

Early reform generation	Early reform rural	Early reform urban
Late reform generation	Late reform rural	Late reform urban

Within each of these six basic groups, further subdivisions exist. Most important to this study are unique subsets of red generation and early reform generation urbanites. First, among red generation urban hukou-holders, roughly 10 percent are known as China's "sent-down" or "educated youth."[27] Mostly recent junior and senior high school graduates, these red generation urbanites were first lauded and empowered by Mao to leverage their ideological purity and fervor as "Red Guards" to challenge authority and destroy any vestiges of feudal or bourgeois thought. Subsequently, however, they were treated by the regime as ideologically suspect and "sent down" to the countryside to learn from the peasantry and rectify their thought through agricultural labor. Second, among early reform generation urban hukou-holders, a key subset is university students. During their youth, higher education was available to only a select few with exceedingly high scores on the national college entrance exam (gaokao 高考). At the time, roughly one-tenth of one percent of the Chinese citizenry was a university student, and just over one percent was a university graduate.[28] Yet in contrast to their elite status, early reform generation urban university students experienced poor living conditions while inflation soared and individuals without an education used political connections to

[27] Social History 257, citing Liu Xiaomeng, Zhongguo zhiqingshi, 848.

[28] From 1979 to 1989, the number of university students rose from one to two million, while the total population increased from roughly 980 million to 1.12 billion. See Gang Guo, "Party Recruitment of College Students in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14(43) (May 2005): 373; and China Statistical Yearbook (Beijing, 1998): 105.

become rich as Party leaders embraced liberalizing economic reforms. As will be discussed below and in chapters five and seven, the formative experiences of "sent-down" red generation urbanites and early reform generation urban university students fostered perceptions of political options and expectations that spurred their dominant role in the PRC's few examples of collective contention promoting systemic political liberalization: the April 1976 Tiananmen movement, Democracy Wall movement of 1978-1980, student protests of 1986-1987, movement of spring 1989, China Democracy Party (1998), and Charter 08 (2008). The "bridge man" who called for political liberalization in October 2022 also was an early reform generation urban university student.[29]

	Rural hukou	**Urban hukou**
Red generation	Red rural	Red urban "Sent down" youth
Early reform generation	Early reform rural	Early reform urban University students
Late reform generation	Late reform rural	Late reform urban

Apart from these sub-groups among red generation and early reform generation urbanites, other variations in formative experiences exist among all six basic groups. Perhaps most prominent are differences related to gender and region. The subsequent chapters recognize and make note of these and other variations within the six groups. Yet, as will be shown, the overall the formative experiences of persons within each group have been similar.

Key elements of formative experiences

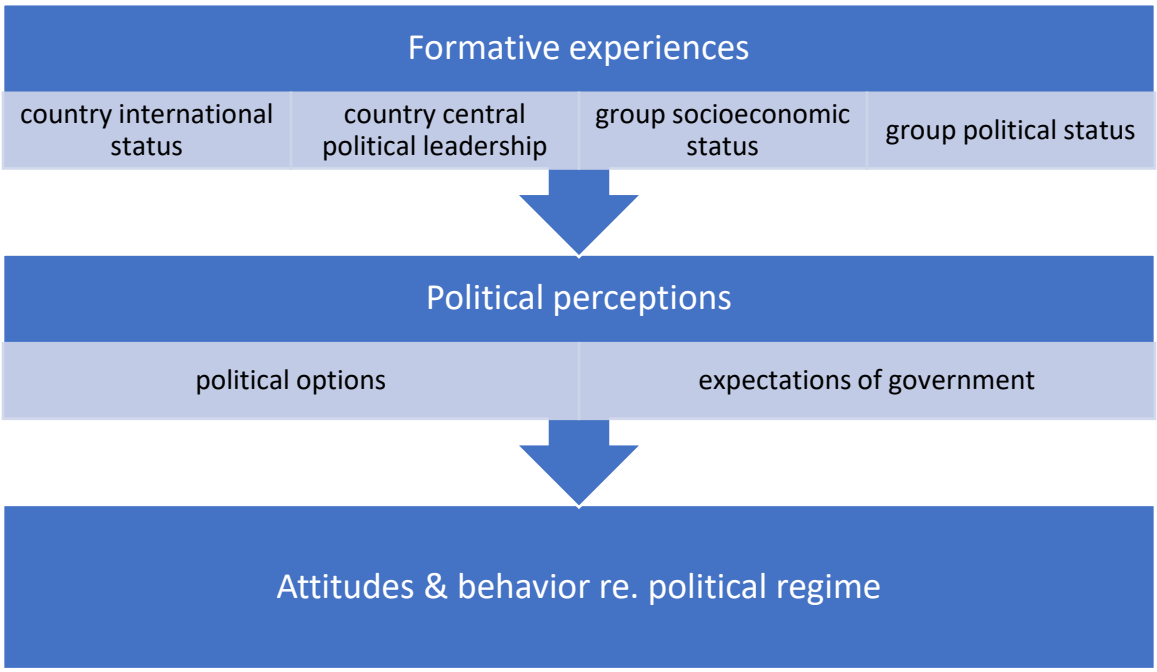
[29] "'Bridge Man' Peng Zaizhou's Mission Impossible and His 'Toolkit for the Removal of Xi Jinping,'" *China Change*, October 19, 2022. https://chinachange.org/2022/10/19/bridge-man-peng-zaizhous-mission-impossible-and-his-toolkit-for-the-removal-of-xi-jinping/

It is impossible to precisely identify and measure the elements of a person's formative experiences that engender specific political attitudes and behaviors. Nonetheless, by combining comparative historical analysis of China's major generational-geographic groups with the insights of scholarship on contentious politics and regime change (particularly in post-communist contexts), four key factors stand out. The first two relate to all citizens, and capture critical features of the "political opportunity structure:" (1) the country's international status (including relative economic and military standing, and record of governance in comparison with other types of political systems); and (2) the country's central political leadership (including its ideological focus, claimed basis of legitimacy, policy stances, and the degree to which the top leadership is settled and united).[30] The third and fourth are specific to each key demographic group in a society and include elements of the group's opportunity structure as well as potential bases for political grievances: (3) socioeconomic status (including family life,

[30] The concept of "political opportunity structure" has become foundational in studies of the origins of collective contention (see Doug McAdam, "Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996). As articulated by Kevin O'Brien, the concept entails the notion that "protest is more likely when institutional access improves, when rifts among members of the elite appear, when influential allies become available, or when the state's capacity or will to repress dissent declines" (Kevin O'Brien, "Collective Action in the Chinese Countryside," *The China Journal* 48 (July 2002): 151. The literature on regime change, including democratization and transitions from communist rule, highlights the role of central leadership divisions over ideology and policy, international shifts, and domestic socioeconomic trajectories in shaping popular political perceptions, attitudes and actions. See Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, vols. 1-4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Valerie Bunce, "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Conclusions," *Comparative Political Studies* 33 (Aug-Sept 2000); Valerie Bunce, "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience," *World Politics* 55(2) (Jan. 2003): 167-192; and Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54(2) (Jan 2002): 212-244.

education, health, level of material security, and opportunities for upward mobility); and (4) political status (including group members' portrayal in official propaganda and level of political incorporation). As shown in Figure 1, these factors shape each group's perception of political options (namely, whether there exists an appealing and viable alternative to the existing political regime) and political expectations (most importantly, whether the government has a responsibility to ensure one's wellbeing). In turn, these political perceptions influence a group's attitudes and behavior regarding the political regime.

FIGURE 1



Working backward through Figure 1, motivation to actively press for regime change arises only when a group perceives the existence of a preferable and practicable alternative believed to protect the group's deserved wellbeing in a way the current regime does not.[31] In

[31] On the importance of political alternatives in transitions from authoritarian rule, see Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy," in Guillermo

most cases, one or more of a group's formative experiences (deriving from the country's international status and domestic leadership, and the group's socioeconomic and political status) will not engender this perception. As a result, while the group may collectively protest particular policies and practices, it will not be inclined to press for regime change. At the same time, should international, domestic, or group-specific changes spur a group to re-evaluate their understanding of political options and expectations, they may become motivated to support systemic political transformation. Importantly, if the existing regime is authoritarian in nature, it should not be assumed that the public will embrace liberal democracy to replace it. And, even in liberal democratic regimes, one or more groups may come to promote authoritarian political change.

The subsequent chapters document the interplay of these factors in each of China's major generational-geographic demographic groups. Among them, only early reform generation urban hukou-holders and "sent down" red generation urban hukou-holders have publicly supported and engaged in sustained collective contention to promote liberalization of China's central CCP-led government. For different reasons, other red generation and early reform generation groups have evidenced acceptance of the CCP-controlled political regime alongside willingness to vociferously and vigorously protest specific regime policies and practices. Late reform generation urban and rural hukou-holders present perhaps the most interesting case—and the most important given their size within the population and presence in China for years to come. Until very recently, their political attitudes and behavior have been

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O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986):47-63.

characterized by passive resignation. But in late November 2022 some among them publicly called for political liberalization and even regime change. Subsequently and through the time of this writing, similar activism has not reappeared. Yet by examining the avenues to authoritarian acceptance and resistance laid out in this study, we can identify the circumstances under which it might. More generally, this comparative historical study of China's generational-geographic cohorts sheds new light on the sources of popular support for authoritarian governance and disinterest in liberal democratic principles in other countries and times.

Generational cohorts

In some respects, the formative experiences of any person are unique. Along with the particularities of one's family situation, lives vary according to one's ascriptive characteristics, identities, and geographic region. Specific international developments, as well as domestic policies and practices, also differentially impact individuals depending on the specific years of their youth. Further, an individual's idiosyncratic personality traits engender unique perspectives. And, one's attitudes and beliefs may shift as they progress through different stages of life.

Nonetheless, generational differences in values, attitudes and behavior are recognized by most people—including parents perplexed or chagrined by their children's views and actions. Bringing early scholarly analysis to bear on this topic, sociologist Karl Mannheim called it "the problem of generations."[32] Mannheim recognized the fuzziness of generational boundaries, but pointed to the existence of demographic groups sharing a common set of

[32] Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in Paul Kecskemeti ed., *Karl Mannheim: Essays* (Routledge, 1952): 276-322.

experiences and social and economic conditions during their formative years—which some cap around age fifteen but most extend to age thirty.[33] These shared circumstances give rise to distinctive generational "locations," each with "a tendency pointing towards certain definite modes of behavior, feeling, and thought."[34] Relatedly, Mannheim notes, "early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world. All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set."[35] Later work by Schuman and others has confirmed that "remembrance of important events varies across generations as a result of their different locations in historical temporality," and that "people tend to name the events they experience in their adolescence and early adulthood as the most important ones."[36]

Scholars studying a range of countries, regime types, and world regions have leveraged the concept of generations to explain public opinion and political behavior. Research on Western advanced industrial democracies highlights differences among the Great Depression, post-WWII, and 1960s generations.[37] Of particular relevance to this volume is Inglehart and his

[33] Mannheim, 278 and 289.
[34] Mannheim, 291.
[35] Mannheim, 298.
[36] Bin Xu, "Intragenerational Variations in Autobiographical Memory: China's 'Sent-Down Youth' Generation," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 82(2) (June 2019): 136.
[37] Examples include D.E. Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1969); Glen Elder, *Children of the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); James Fenrich, "Activists Ten Years later: A Test of Generational Unit Continuity," *Journal of Social Issues* 30 (1974): 95-118; Ronald Inglehart, The Silent Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Abramson 1974; Philip Converse, *The Dynamics of Party Support: Cohort-Analyzing Party Identification* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976); Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi, *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and Their Parents* (Princeton, N J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Kent Jennings and Gregory Markus, "Partisan Orientations over the Long Haul: Results from the Three-Wave Political Socialization Panel Study," *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 1000-1018; Ronald Inglehart and Paul Abramson, "Economic Security and Value Change," *American Political Science Review* 88(2) (June 1994): 336-354.

collaborators' finding that in Western Europe and the Unites States, the "exceptional security" experienced by those coming of age in the post-WWII period led to a political shift when this generation became "old enough to have a political impact." The resultant youth protests of the 1960s-70s focused not on material matters such as wage increases but on "post-materialist" values such as democracy, human rights, racial and gender equality, and environmental protection.[38] The broader counter-culture movement of this era embraced tolerance, freedom of lifestyle choice, and openness to outsiders. Meanwhile, older and less secure generational cohorts supported more authoritarian political leaders and parties, expressing "strong in-group solidarity, rejection of outsiders, and rigid conformity to group norms."[39] At the same time, Inglehart and Norris emphasize that people also respond to their current conditions, with economic downturns leading all generational cohorts to focus more on material issues and to be more likely to support authoritarian and xenophobic policies—even while cohort-based differences in values remain intact.[40]

As this book will show, parallel phenomena are seen in China, with distinct generational cohorts exhibiting attitudes and behavior related to the level of security experienced during their formative years. In China, the closest approximation to the 1960s generation in the West is the early reform era generation. Concomitantly, though, in China the rural-urban hukou divide further separates citizens in this generation. In addition, other dissimilarities in the

[38] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse," *Perspectives on Politics* 15:2 (June 2017): 443-444.
[39] Inglehart and Norris 2017: 443.
[40] Inglehart and Norris 2017: 444-447.

formative experiences of China's early reform generation and the West's 1960s generation coincide with distinct attributes in the Chinese case.

One key difference is the nature of the political regime: in China it was Leninist whereas those in Western Europe and the United States were based on liberal democratic principles. Thus, existing work on generational groupings in countries with a communist history provides perhaps a more relevant comparative vantage point for understanding cohort differences in China. Indeed, as Bahry notes, generational shifts tend to be starker and easier to delineate in communist contexts such as the Soviet Union than in countries in general.[41] For, communist regimes typically feature more "totalitarian" political penetration of society than non-communist authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies.[42] Indeed, numerous works on generational differences in Russia and former Soviet/Eastern Bloc countries demonstrate that age cohorts differ in their experiences and "political outlooks."[43] Though these studies vary in the number of generations under focus (in part due to the time span of a particular work), they agree on the divergent features of wartime, Stalinist, post-Stalinist, Gorbachev, and post-Soviet generations.

Findings in a number of these studies parallel phenomena found in China. First, surveys of eleven post-communist countries in Russia and East/Central Europe in 1993-94 find that citizens coming of age during the post-Stalin era, and especially during period of opening under

[41] Donna Bahry, "Politics, Generations, and Change in the USSR," in James Millar, ed., *Politics, Work, and Daily Life in the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 75.
[42] Juan Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes," in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, vol. 3 (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975).
[43] Richard Rose and Ellen Carnaghan, "Generational Effects on Attitudes to Communist Regimes: A Comparative Analysis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11(1) (1995): 40.

Gorbachev, were less approving of the old regime than were older cohorts.[44] Second, as in China, older generations tended to compare the current political system with the pre-revolutionary past, whereas post-Stalin/post-Mao cohorts have based their evaluation on current system performance, including relative to the West.[45] Third and relatedly, Bahry (writing in 1987) finds that members of the post-Stalin generation with a higher education were significantly more unorthodox than any other age or educational group."[46] Similarly, China's red generation "sent down" youth and early reform era urban university students exhibited the most politically nonconformist attitudes and behavior, and assessed the current regime against the liberalizing claims of reform-oriented leaders and the performance of political systems in the West.

Fifth, Curry and others document how education, propaganda, and state control of the economy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc engendered feelings of popular empowerment and a "heightened sense of the relationship between politics and economics."[47] The educational system brought near universal literacy while stressing Marxism and political economy, cooperation and commitment to community, and "the 'glories' of communism as a 'workers' state' in which workers were mobilized to lead."[48] Through adulthood, state propaganda told regular citizens "they were important" and "'their' state owed them support," inculcating in the public a "sense of 'rightful power.'"[49] Relatedly, "economic difficulties were

[44] Rose and Carnaghan 1995: 28.
[45] Bahry 1987: 72 and 91.
[46] Bahry 1987: 85.
[47] Jane Curry, "The Sociological Legacies of Communism," in Zoltan Barany, ed., *The Legacies of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 60.
[48] Curry 1995: 58-59.
[49] Curry 1995: 56 and 59.

seen not as the fault of a firm or its management but as the fault of the state."[50] As will be shown in the case of China, similar values are exhibited by the "red" and "early reform era" generations that came of age amidst roughly equivalent communist education, propaganda, and economic systems—particularly among urban hukou-holders working in state-owned enterprises who were subjected to mass layoffs in the late 1990s-early 2000s.

Like other communist and post-communist countries, generational differences in China are condensed and exaggerated. In the 2003 World Values Survey, for example, the distance in values between old and young age groups in China was 19 points, in comparison to 2-4 points in the US, Britain, South Korea, and India.[51] As more colorfully articulated by an 87-year-old Chinese woman, "what a life today's young people are living! The difference from my days is like the difference between heaven and earth." The daughter of this woman, education professor Fengshu Liu, argues that indeed, China is unique in the rapid—even abrupt—and dramatic nature of its generational change in all domains. [52]

Scholars from an array of disciplines have noted the existence of distinct generational cohorts in China.[53] As with similar research on Russia and the former Eastern Bloc, the number of cohorts specified in each study varies, but the general dividing lines are consistent. Most

[50] Curry 1995: 60.
[51] Jiaming Sun and Xun Wang, "Value differences between generations in China: a study in Shanghai," *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(1) (Feb 2010): 70.
[52] Fengshu Liu, *Modernization as Lived Experiences: Three Generations of Young Men and Women in China* (NY: Routledge, 2020): 1.
[53] Sun and Wang 2010: 67. Examples include: Martin King Whyte, "The Politics of Life Chances in the People's Republic of China," in Y.M. Shaw, ed., *Power and Policy in the PRC* (Boulder: Westview, 1985: 244-265; Cheng and Dai 1995; Orville and Jorgensen 1995; Wang and Wu 2002; Yan 2003; Egri and Ralston 2004; Elegant 2007; Dundon 2008; Evans 2008; Li 2008; Tamara Erickson, "Generations in China," Harvard Business Review (March 28, 2009) https://hbr.org/2009/03/generations-in-china; Sun and Wang 2010; Clark 2012; Liu 2020.

broadly, popular experiences contrasted dramatically for those coming of age in the Maoist "red" era (1949-1976), the early reform era (roughly 1976-1989), and the late reform era (approximately 1990-present).[54]

Chinese citizens who matured during the "red" era experienced radical, totalitarian campaigns to overturn and reshape all aspects of the economy, political system, social structure, and culture in line with Mao's vision of "communism with Chinese characteristics." [55] If we accept the notion that a person's formative years span early childhood to early adulthood (roughly 8-30 years of age), Chinese citizens who came of age during the Maoist period were born in 1965 or earlier. In 2020, this demographic group was 55 years of age or older and constituted roughly 26 percent of China's total population.[56] Within this generation, a key subunit consists of the relatively educated urban hukou-holders who were "sent down" to the countryside between the late 1960s and 1970s. This group makes up approximately 1 percent of China's total population.[57]

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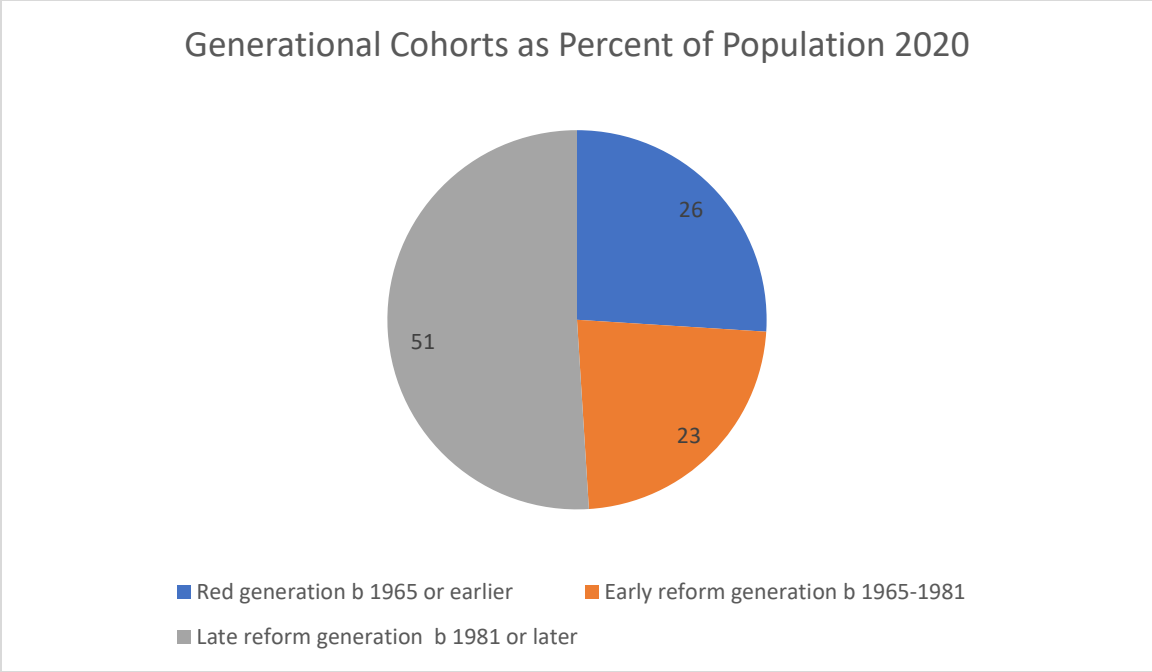
[54] Though the "post-Mao" era began with Mao Zedong's death in September 1976, the start of the "Reform" era typically is pegged to the December 1978 Third Plenum of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee meeting, which cemented Deng Xiaoping's leadership of the Party and ushered in path-breaking economic and political reforms.

[55] Many twists and turns in policy occurred in the Maoist era, and beyond separating out "sent down youth," other narrower generational cohorts can be identified. Citizens coming of age in the early years of the PRC (1949-1955) had experiences that differed from those whose formative years spanned the Great Leap Forward (late 1950s-early 1960s) or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (mid-1960s-1976) [and as in the case of sent down youth, even the Cultural Revolution period was experienced differently by subsets of the population, depending in part on whether one came of age primarily during the early (1966-1968) or late (1969-1976) phase of the Cultural Revolution].

[56] Calculation based on China Statistical Yearbook 2021, Table 2-17 Population by Age and Gender (2020), http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2021/indexeh.htm.

[57] This estimate assumes perhaps 15 million of the original 17 million sent down youth are still alive.



Chinese citizens within the early reform era came of age during a period of profound transition, domestically from radical to reformist policies amidst unsettled central leadership, and internationally with the crumbling of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc and China's opening to the West. Members of this generational cohort were born from roughly 1965-1980. In 2020 they were ages 40-55 and constituted approximately 23 percent of the Chinese citizenry. Within this generation, a key subset is early reform era university students, who comprise a tiny one-tenth of 1 percent of the total population yet stand out alongside red generation "sent down" youth in their collective actions to promote political liberalization.

For Chinese in the subsequent generational cohort—coming of age from the early 1990s through the present—life has been much different. These citizens were born circa 1981 or later; in 2020 they were aged 39 or younger, constituting more than half (roughly 51 percent) of China's total population. This vast swath of the Chinese populace has experienced virtually nothing of the pre-reform political, economic and social systems—with the significant exception

of the household registration (hukou) structure dividing the populace into rural and urban categories. Late reform era Chinese citizens also are the only group to come of age under the One Child Policy, in effect in its strongest form from 1980-2015. Regardless of hukou status, young Chinese have matured within a largely capitalist economic system, where individuals are taught it is up to oneself to swim or sink in a highly competitive and insecure environment. Relatedly, unlike earlier generations they have not been assigned jobs by the government. As a result, there is more variation in socioeconomic status within this generation. Late reform generation Chinese also have grown up with digital technologies. Meanwhile, they have known their country only as a successful and powerful international economic and military player.

Intrigued by these stark generational shifts, scholars have examined the distinct values, attitudes and behaviors exhibited by each. Some, like Yunxiang Yan, Fengshu Liu, and Harriet Evans, focus on gender, sexuality, and family relations, uncovering dramatic differences among each cohort.[58] Similarly, researchers such as Thomas Gold, Paul Clark, and Stanley Rosen detail distinct youth cultures in the late Mao era, early Reform era, and late Reform era.[59] Additionally, a vast literature exists on the unique experiences and outlook of China's red generation "sent down" youth.[60] Looking at value change, Sun and Wang document a "drastic

[58] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism* 2003; Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender* 2008; Fengshu Liu, *Modernization as Lived Experiences* 2020.
[59] Thomas Gold, "Youth and the State," *China Quarterly* 127 (Sept 1991): 594-612; Stanley Rosen, "Contemporary Chinese Youth and the State," *Journal of Asian Studies* 68:2 (May 2009): 359-369; Paul Clark, *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[60] Among many examples, see Thomas Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); and Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth* (1968-1980) (Hong Kong: Chinese

value shift" between the "red" generation and those coming of age in the reform period—with the latter placing great importance on individual self-development and the former prioritizing the collective good.[61] The subsequent chapters of this volume elaborate on these and other findings about the values, attitudes and behaviors of China's major generational groups.

Residential Registration (Hukou) Status

Overlapping the major age cohorts in the PRC are societal divisions based on residential registration (hukou 户口) status. In this respect, China is unlike other countries, communist or not. As noted earlier, from the late 1950s through the present, each Chinese citizen has been issued a residential registration card, or hukou.[62] From 1958-2014, all hukou were stamped with one of two categories: "rural" (nongye 農業, literally "agricultural") or "urban" (feinong 非農, literally "non-agricultural"), based on the hukou status of the parents.[63] Since 2014, new hukou have not included the "rural" or "urban" marker, only the location of the parent's official "home" as stipulated on the parent's hukou. Thus, although Chinese children born since 2014 do not carry the "urban" or "rural" notation on their hukou, their official "home" will remain in the countryside if that is the location of their parent's official "home." As of 2020, roughly 64

University of Hong Kong Press, 2013); and Guobin Yang, The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China (NY: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[61] Sun and Wang 2010: 74-75.

[62] Babies born to unmarried parents or beyond the One Child Policy allocation for the parents are not issued a hukou (and are not considered full-fledged citizens).

[63] Through 2013, a baby's hukou followed the mother's hukou. Since 2013, the baby's hukou can follow either the mother's or the father's. Chuanbo Chen and C. Cindy Fan, China's Hukou Puzzle: Why Don't Rural Migrants Want Urban Hukou The China Review 16:3 (Oct 2016): 12.

percent of the Chinese population held a rural hukou, and 36 percent urban.[64] During the Maoist period, 86 percent were rural and 14 percent urban.[65]

Throughout the existence of the hukou system, government policies have privileged urban hukou holders, such that urban hukou have been highly coveted and associated with superior socioeconomic status. As will be discussed more fully below and in the following chapters, policies toward urban and rural hukou holders have varied for each generational cohort, yet the underlying advantaged position of urban hukou holders has remained constant. Above all, the hukou system has restricted the geographic mobility of the Chinese population. Public goods and services are tied to one's official "home" location and this location can be changed only with government approval. The benefits of an urban hukou include access to much higher quality health care, education, and housing. For red generation and early reform era generation urbanites, stable and secure employment also was assured. As a result of the separate government treatment of rural and urban hukou holders, members of the two groups rarely interact socially or inter-marry. Further, both urban and rural hukou holders view urbanites as more educated, cultured and modern. The desirability of an urban hukou is illustrated by the fact that it is virtually unheard-of for an urban hukou-holder to seek approval to change to a rural hukou, while rural hukou holders often go to great lengths to acquire an urban hukou. Indeed, this was even the case during the radical Maoist period, when ruralites were held up by the regime as more politically pure, and urbanites were treated as politically suspect and in many cases were sent to the countryside for ideological rectification.

[64] Rozelle and Hell, Invisible China (2020): 79.
[65] Estimate based on China National Bureau of Statistics data http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/statisticaldata/yearlydata/YB2000e/D04E.htm

The socially fracturing consequences of the hukou system have been thoroughly documented. Fei-Ling Wang describes the system as "a unique form of institutional exclusion that divides and organizes the largest nation on earth."[66] Within this system, urban and rural hukou-holders live in entirely different worlds, one privileged and one not. Donald Trieman describes urban-rural disparities as the "difference between heaven and earth."[67] Dorothy Solinger equates the hukou system with a caste system.[68] Others identify it as a form of apartheid.[69] Further, recent research on the 2014 hukou system reforms concludes that—far from diminishing the divisive effects of the hukou system—the changes have created a new "'Great Wall,' a barrier that protects the beneficiaries of welfare provision in guarded cities from the 'low-end [rural migrant] population.'"[70]

Overall, as with generational cohorts, urban or rural hukou status is a key differentiating factor in a person's formative years. Such an approach builds on earlier scholarship showing how class mediates the experiences of individuals coming of age during the same period in a given society.[71] By highlighting hukou status, however, this book captures broader aspects of status salient in the Chinese case. Moreover, unlike existing works with a narrower focus, the

[66] Fei-Ling Wang, Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China's Hukou System (Stanford: Stanford University press, 2005): xiii.
[67] Donald J. Treiman, "The 'Difference between Heaven and Earth': Urban–Rural Disparities in Well-Being in China," Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2012): 33–47.
[68] Dorothy Solinger, Polarized Cities: Portraits of Rich and Poor in Urban China (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
[69] Lynette Ong, cited in Tania Branigan, "China reforms hukou system to improve migrant workers' rights," The Guardian, July 31, 2014; Peter Alexander and Anita Chan, "Does China Have an Apartheid Pass System?" Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2004): 609–629; Yi Wan and Edward Vickers, "Toward Meritocratic Apartheid? Points Systems and Migrant Access to China's Urban Public Schools," China Quarterly 2021: 210-238.
[70] Ren-Jie Hong, Yu-Chi Tsent, and Thung-Hong Lin, "Guarding a new great wall: the politics of household registration reforms and public provision in China," China Quarterly (online first view May 2022): 3.
[71] Examples span Western liberal democracies [Elder (1974)]; European communist regimes [Szelenyi and Manchin (1987)] and China [Davis (1985); Zhou and Hou (1999)].

book undertakes a comparative historical analysis of all key age and hukou groups in the PRC, distilling patterns among life experiences, perceptions, and political attitudes and behavior that illuminate the sources of acceptance of or resistance to China's governing political regime.

Overview of the volume

In sum, this book argues that red era Chinese had formative experiences distinct from early reform and late reform era youth, and that each generational cohort's experiences are further distinguished by urban or rural hukou status. Red generation urban sent down youth and early reform generation urban university students comprise additional key categories. Consequently, to understand public attitudes and behavior in China, it is necessary to separately examine the fundamental generation/hukou groups that constitute the Chinese citizenry. As illustrated in Figure 1 above, individuals in each category share similar formative experiences related to China's international status and central political leadership, as well as their group's socioeconomic and political status. These experiences, in turn, have given each group a particular understanding of their political options and expectations of government. As illustrated in the chart below, for most, this configuration of experiences and perceptions has manifested in a lack of collective contention advocating for the political liberalization of China's CCP-led regime.

	Is government responsible for your wellbeing?	Is government facilitating your wellbeing?	Are there appealing/viable alternatives to the existing political regime?	Collective contention promoting political liberalization
Red rural	Yes	Mixed	No	No
Red urban	Yes	Yes	No	No
Red urban sent down	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Early reform rural	Yes	Yes	No	No

Early reform urban	Yes	Mixed	No	No
Early reform university	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Late reform rural	No	No	No	No
Late reform urban	Mixed	Mixed	No	No

The remainder of the book details the unique experiences and political understandings of China's key demographic groups, showing how for most, there has been little apparent interest in promoting political liberalization. Part One examines the red generation, with an overview of China's international status and domestic political leadership during their formative years followed by chapters on the more specific formative socioeconomic and political experiences red generation rural hukou-holders (chapter two), urban hukou-holders (chapter three), and urban hukou-holding sent-down youth (chapter four). In part two, we turn to the early reform generation, again starting with the international and central CCP leadership context in the formative years followed by chapters reviewing the unique experiences of rural hukou-holders (chapter five), urban hukou-holders (chapter six), and university students (chapter seven). Part three focuses on the late reform generation—China's youth aged in their thirties or younger. After laying out the general international and domestic political features experienced by this generation when coming of age, chapter eight focuses on the socioeconomic and political status of rural-hukou holders and chapter nine looks at those of urban-hukou holders.

The final chapter underscores and elaborates on the book's overall finding—that multiple experiential pathways can lead to popular acceptance of authoritarian rule, while the confluence of factors leading to public promotion of political liberalization appears unusual and ephemeral. The concluding chapter also examines the degree to which other world-historical

cases support this general conclusion. Looking into China's future, passive resignation punctuated by short-lived resistance seems the most likely trajectory as the population ages and older cohorts pass from the scene. If clear cracks in the CCP-led regime appear in the absence of a preferable alternative, nihilistic public expressions of anger and despair may surface. Should an opening arise presenting young urbanites with a preferable and viable alternative, their current dissatisfaction may lead them to engage in more sustained and determined efforts to support regime change. However, it should not be assumed that what comes next will be liberal democratic.