

Can the Chinese Communist Party Survive? The Limits of Adaptation limits

Professor of International Development Jude Howell talks about her recent research into governance in China in this post written for the LSE International Development blog, based on her article on the same subject published in *Journal of Social Policy* in January.

In 2016 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will have been in power for almost 70 years. While the former Soviet bloc countries collapsed under the weight of poor economic performance, rising dissatisfaction, and systemic rigidities, the CCP has ridden the waves of rapid economic growth to become the world's second largest economy. Even though production is now slowing down, the CCP is still at the helm, steering a course through the global storm of economic recession.



What accounts for its survival? Scholars such as Elizabeth Perry, Sebastian Heilmann, and David Shambaugh have pointed to the Party's extraordinary capacities to adapt, experiment and innovate whilst retaining control. Indeed, as Elizabeth Perry underlines, such capacities have their roots in guerrilla-style policy-making during the tough Yanan years of the 1930s and 1940s. The ability to adjust policy according to changing circumstances, to respond pragmatically to actually existing conditions, and to abandon ideological orthodoxies when faced with stark realities have a long trajectory in Chinese Party history. By adapting governance structures and practices, innovating and experimenting, the CCP has managed to survive.

However, adaptation also has its limits, as my recent research on community governance shows. Community governance refers to the policies, measures and practices introduced over the last two decades to refashion the way the Party/state governs society at the lowest level of the neighbourhood. If it works well, then the idea is that the state at community level – the street committees and residents' committees – will be more responsive to community needs. Furthermore, citizens will become less dependent on the state and take the initiative in community affairs, such as standing as candidates for election or setting up property owners' committees or caring for vulnerable groups. Alternatively, if the idea does not work out, then the system will continue to be top-down, with the Party firmly in control and residents reluctant to engage actively in community affairs. Problems of social cohesion, fragmentation and inequality will continue, threatening social stability and ultimately Party rule.





Shanghai by Night by Jannes Glas.(via [Flickr](#), [CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

My research in Shanghai, along with other studies on community governance, demonstrates that adaptation has its limits and problems of social cohesion and inequality that potentially threaten stability remain untouched. As ever, unintended consequences have a role to play here but also important are some crucial structural issues. Principal amongst these are the institutionalisation of inequality, the spread of market principles, professionalization, along with certain pathologies of authoritarianism. To elaborate here on one of these issues, China's notorious residence permit system, which denies migrants various benefits enjoyed by urban citizens and excludes them politically from community elections, weakens attempts to mould a new type of citizen who participates in community affairs. Moreover their position as outsiders is reinforced through specific government routines of monitoring and surveillance and through the negative attitudes of urban residents. This engenders social exclusion, indifference and alienation rather than nurturing independent, engaged residents eager to participate in public life. Unless these fundamental institutional inequalities are addressed, it is unlikely that community governance can succeed. Added to this, the pathologies of Leninist authoritarianism prove an enduring constraint on enthusing residents to engage independently in community affairs.

Adaptation thus is not without its limits. Whilst this is unlikely to lead to regime crisis, it also does not guarantee stability and legitimacy. We can expect in future for deep-seated structural issues of inequality and the pathological need of the Party to retain control to continue to rupture state attempts to re-fashion community governance, and indeed, broader moves to adapt political structures through enhanced participation and inclusion.

To read more about this topic see Jude Howell, '[Adaptation under scrutiny: Peering through the lens of community governance in China](#)', *Journal of Social Policy*, online version published January 2016

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