

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

Kinga Soós

Being kept to the socialist road? Variations of the Chinese Communist Party's hegemonic discourse from Deng to Xi

Supervisors: Viktor Eszterhai Viktor PhD, and Viktor Kiss PhD

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science
Political Science Doctoral Program

2025

I. Research background and rationale for the topic

The study of modern Chinese politics nowadays is mainly motivated by China's economic importance and international relations. However, given the experience of the gradual democratization of the East Asian developmental state, it seems puzzling that the People's Republic of China (PRC) with its spectacular growth and development in the 21st century is still governed by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The founding of the PRC and its first 25 years can best be described by the totalitarian rule of Mao Zedong, and the ideological tenets of Mao Zedong Thought (*Mao Zedong sixiang* 毛泽东思想), which applied Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese conditions. The historical role of Mao Zedong Thought is still decisive since it is enshrined in the state Constitution and the constitution of the CPC. The ruling party essentially defines itself as the heir to the ideals of Mao Zedong and the Marxist tradition.

At the same time, the PRC has grown to become the world's second-largest economy in nominal terms of gross domestic product (GDP), and the country with the largest contribution to world GDP (at purchasing power parity).¹ According to the scholarly consensus, China's unprecedented economic development started with the reform policies introduced in 1978 under the guardianship of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 and his circle. As a consequence of the Dengist 'reform and opening-up' gradually a new economic structure, the so-called 'socialist market economy', with distinctly capitalist features emerged in the PRC. Simultaneously, a limited political reform took place after 1978, transforming the revolutionary party into a 'developmental party' (Zhang 2008), and then by the turn of the century into a 'ruling party' (Fewsmith 2021; Vogel 2018; Joseph 2014). On these grounds, the continuity between the intellectual legacy and political work of the father of Chinese communism, Mao Zedong, and the present of China seems questionable. *How, then, is it possible that, despite the substantive changes in the economic system, the comprehensive transformation of the conditions of production, and the growing presence of Chinese products on the world market, the Chinese political establishment preserved some essential elements of socialism? How has the Chinese Communist Party maintained - and still maintains - its legitimacy in these changing circumstances?* These are the questions motivating my doctoral research, as well as these were the research questions of my master's thesis 'Socialism as Social Imaginary: An Analysis of the Political Discourse of Deng Xiaoping's reform' that mainly focused on the initiation of the reforms.

¹ IMF World Economic Outlook 2023. URL: https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC

When it comes to the legitimacy of Chinese socialism, according to the findings of my master's thesis, it can be argued that the reform of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was associated with the role of Deng Xiaoping, should not be understood only from an economic perspective, but also as the foundation of a new discourse of modernization that both creates continuity in the history of the PRC and brings together the political changes and social ruptures emerging in the different phases of the development. Thus, this discourse of modernization defines the politics (or the discourse) of the CPC to this day. The power structure in the post-Mao period shows a certain homogeneity. While in Mao Zedong's China, arguably revolutionary practice and the cult of Mao as a revolutionary, military and political leader, and the theoretical founder of Chinese socialism formed the basis of the CPC's legitimacy; in the social milieu and the political climate within the Party after Mao's death, a competition took place between different interpretations of the party's role and legitimacy, as well as between different visions of China's future. The predominance of Deng's reform discourse in this context marked a particular postmodern transformation of the legitimating basis of power: legitimacy was derived from the optimization of the systemic governance performance (Lyotard 1993:9), from the functional effectiveness of power as defined within the nation-state framework, while socialism (and communism in the Marxian sense) remained a factor that shaped the social imagination. According to this understanding the leadership-specific discourses of the paramount leaders who followed Deng — Jiang Zemin 江泽民, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 and Xi Jinping 习近平— all articulated their versions of this 'overarching [socialist] narrative' (Patapan-Wang 2018:59) applied to current conditions and aiming to override the tensions between the need for social stability and the centrifugal forces acting against the regime. *This dissertation aims to reconstruct this ideological continuity, which unfolds through continuous adaptivity and is ultimately the basis of the party's legitimacy, by focusing on the CPC's political discourse between 1978 and 2017.*

For a long time, the literature on the political transformations that resulted from Chinese reform socialism has been dominated by approaches that have marginalized the role of ideology. As Goldman and MacFarquhar argued, China's transformation can be described in terms of economic reforms that have brought about limited political or rather institutional changes (Goldman & MacFarquhar, 1999). A common argument on the legitimacy of the CPC is that it depends entirely on material success and the country's economic performance, rather than on a strong ideological basis. Falkenheim (1979), for example, argues that the main policy directive of post-Mao China was economic and technological modernization, and additionally, the development of a relatively stable political climate was a necessary condition for the former.

Overall, the academic approaches to the late 1990s are characterized by the study of the gradual economic liberalization's perceived effects: the Western trends that flooded into China as a result of intensified trade and foreign investment; and the emergence of an increasing middle class within the framework of the stronger national economy. The main premise of this research was based on the observation that Leninist vanguard parties typically failed to implement organizational changes that could consolidate their power in changing circumstances, consequently, scholars conclude that the Chinese reforms had set in motion a process of gradual democratization, although at a somewhat slower pace than expected (Goldman-MacFarquhar 1999).

After the second half of the 2000s, scholarly work on modern Chinese politics increasingly focused on the party's governance strategy and its capacity to adapt successfully to changing circumstances. The starting point of the new approaches was that the CPC had introduced a series of significant internal reforms since the beginning of the reform period and that the understanding of the pragmatism of party governance is essential (Lai 2016; Lampton 2014; Shambaugh 2008). Furthermore, there was a general agreement that the CPC's dominance is a combination of legitimacy, co-optation, and repression (Dickson 2016). These new approaches focused on the reorganization of the Leninist party structure and organizational reforms (Shambaugh 2008; Fewsmith 2021), which took place in three major waves: first, in the adaptation of the state party to the post-revolutionary environment; second, during the consolidation period after Mao's death; and third, as a result of the reflections on the demise of Soviet socialism in the 1990s, when the central leadership had understood that the CPC's survival required continuing to deepen reforms while resisting tendencies —through a variety of means— challenging its autocratic rule. These approaches, however, relegated the role of ideology to the background.

Nevertheless, there are examples in the literature on post-Mao Chinese politics of the state-party-centered analysis of legitimacy, in which ideology and propaganda, i.e. official political discourse, are central. These approaches are essentially linked to a group of researchers at the *Asia Studies Institute of GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies*. The GIGA-affiliated scholars assume that ideology (defined as a worldview, a vision of an ideal society that projects a long-term social goal) is the baseline for party legitimacy and the social support it requires. Because ideology is essential from the perspective of the historical continuity of the People's Republic, and China's global political ambitions (Klimeš & Marinelli 2018). They further argue that discourses and the ideologies articulated by them necessarily change adaptively, because any political party in power for a longer period must adapt to the changing

social environment and realities (Sausmikat 2006). In other words, the CPC's ability to reestablish its legitimacy is also a guarantee of its survival. The drive to respond pragmatically and adapt to specific circumstances is particularly visible in the formal ideological contributions attached to each political leader, as canonized in the party constitution.

Accordingly, the popular view that the CPC's authority and legitimacy can be explained primarily by the regime's efficiency in economic governance and the resulting economic growth (Goldman-MacFarquhar 1999; Ci 2019) seems unsatisfactory (Holbig 2009:38). Rather than taking performance-based legitimacy as a given, 'the key to the CCP's quest for legitimacy lies in understanding its attempts to shape public perceptions and to influence the subjective meanings against which its performance is measured' (Holbig 2018:360). In other words, the analysis of the signification practices and political discourses that determine social meanings is a *sine qua non* for exploring the legitimacy of the CPC.

II. Methodology

The theoretical and methodological framework of the dissertation is discourse theory. This approach, the discourse analytical tradition of the Essex School, grew out of the post-Marxist and post-structuralist oeuvre of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe represented the 'the Gramscian fashion of leftist scholarship in the 1970s, rewriting and radicalizing Gramsci's critique of the economic determinism of Marxian theory' (Szűcs 2008:8-9). The critical project of Laclau and Mouffe first unfolded in the pages of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), where the authors, through a genealogical examination of the concept of hegemony, mainly focused on ideas on political practices, connected to the broader Marxist stream of thought, that went beyond the articulation of class interests and addressed a wider range of society (typically the 'people') (Szűcs 2008). A discourse-theoretical approach to Chinese politics in the given period seems to be handy because Laclau and Mouffe, whose final theoretical objective aimed for the conditions of radical democracy, started from the deconstruction of the hegemony of authoritarian political discourses. Thus, discourse theory can be understood as a novel theoretical framework for conceptualizing post-socialist ideology and legitimacy, which has not yet found its way into the field of the study of Chinese politics.

Discourse theory is based on the premise that discourse is a systematic arrangement of relations between linguistic and non-linguistic signifiers (Laclau-Mouffe 2014), which at the same time determines the potential signifying practices (articulations) of social subjects (Jorgensen–

Phillips 2002; Andersen 2003). The coherence of these practices of a given discourse manifests itself in the organization of discursive elements (signifiers) into different patterns within the net of signification (Martilla 2015a). Discursive patterns are of central importance for the analysis because the subject positions of the social actors and the objects that are given to them are constituted through the meanings that unfold in those patterns. To describe a discourse, we need to identify the so-called nodes or master signifiers that structure the chain of meanings. These are the reference points that represent the common identity of the elements of the discourse and the specific policies, institutions, and norms associated with them (Martilla 2015b:49).

Analyzing the discursive unification of society, or the attempt to achieve it, i.e. political articulation, Laclau and Mouffe relied on the concept of hegemony. According to their neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony, it is, in its simplest definition, the ideological moment when ‘a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it’ (Laclau-Mouffe 2014:x). The main task of discourse analysis can be defined in terms of exploring the general hegemonic relations within society and the conditions of hegemony’s continuous (re)formation. Thus, the main objective of the analysis presented in this dissertation is to describe and understand the formation and logic of the hegemonic discourse(s) that constitute the identities of social subjects and institutions.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe do not define a uniform methodology for discourse theory-informed analysis along the lines of the post-foundational idea that the interpretation is shaped by both the subject and the object of analysis. There are, however, attempts to create a unified set of methodological principles within the Essex school, and in this dissertation, I draw on one of the most comprehensive and complex attempts, the post-foundationalist discourse analysis (PFDA) program associated with Tomas Martilla (2015ab).

According to the PFDA research agenda, the first step of empirical analysis is ‘the conscious co-construction of the object of analysis’ (Martilla 2015a). This means conceptualizing the research object and mapping its historical context; that is, seeking to gain knowledge primarily from secondary sources in order to grasp the socio-historical foundations of the signifiers that constitute the field of discursivity (all the available signifiers and meaning of the historical pretext and the current context of the discourse).

In the second phase of the analysis, we reconstruct—that is to make discernible—the discourse responsible for the particular historical formation of the research object (Martilla 2015b:139). Discursive relations and identities form the backbone of the reconstruction of discourse, the former describing the system of relations between discursive elements, while the latter—i.e.

values, subject positions, and activities— encompasses the meaning and semantic function of the elements.

From the identity categories elaborated by Martilla, I created a code system for content analysis based on the phenomenal features associated with them, which I extended with *in vivo* codes during the analysis. The analysis was carried out using *Atlas.ti 8* software. The corpus of text that formed the basis of the content analysis was the compilation of the reports of the CPC's General Secretaries at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, convened regularly every five years in the post-Mao period. An in-depth analysis of the reports from the eleventh to nineteenth Party Congresses and the speech of Deng Xiaoping at the Working Conference of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee was carried out. This latter is particularly significant because it launched the reform and opening-up policy. Since these speeches are propaganda texts, they are available to the general public, with official English translations (certified by Party translation agencies or press organs), and some texts are also available in Hungarian. For various reasons, I used all the available editions in Chinese, English, and Hungarian.

Based on the author's preliminary studies on Chinese politics and the methodological commitment described above, the socialism of post-Mao China as the object of research can be defined based on two factors implied in the literature. The first of these is the transition from the ideals represented and enforced by Mao to Deng reform socialism as the starting point of the phenomenon under study, while the second is the relatively uniform meta-discourse of the official discourse of the party in the period of reform and opening up, that is the socialism with Chinese characteristics. The focus of the research is thus on the one hand the re-foundation of the CPC's official discourse (and its legitimacy) after Mao's death and the discursive changes that this entailed; on the other hand, the adaptation and further development of the CPC's institutionalized official discourse by the various leadership cores in 1982 and 2017.

III. The academic results of the thesis

The historical analysis of the more than four decades between Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and Xi Jinping's consolidation of power is focused on the most salient events in Chinese politics, the party congresses and the reports that were presented on these occasions. Furthermore, the analysis included the most important official documents issued between the congresses. In the analytical and contextualizing subsections of Chapters V and VI of the thesis, I have shown how the various leaders of the reform and

opening-up period defined Chinese socialism and how the values, subject positions, and activities associated with it were traced back to the material necessities articulated in their discourse. From this overview, it is clear that the individual hegemonic discourses of General Secretaries build on each other as layers: intertextual relations create continuity in the history of the party, while changes and adjustments for pragmatic ends are manifested in new signifiatory practices.

The basic assumption, derived from discourse theory, is that all the discourses under study are characterized by certain discursive practices aimed at maintaining or establishing the appropriation (i.e. hegemony) of meanings that determine perceived social realities. In defining these practices, two aspects were taken into account: on the one hand, following Johann Gerschewski (2023), I built on the premise that to explain regime stability, we need to understand the major challenges to the regime and how the leadership has responded to them — this is relevant for articulating the material challenges that emerged and from the perspective of the adjustment of the discourse. On the other hand, I identified the sources of legitimacy of the CPC, including those of the different leadership cores, in the period under review, according to the categories defined by David Beetham (2004). These categories are (a) legality, i.e. the legal framework or ground rules for the exercise of power; (b) the source of the sovereign's authority; (c) the designated objective of governance; and finally (d) the means of winning over the broader masses of the people, i.e. the means of maintaining consensus.

- In Mao Zedong's China which can be described as a classical state socialism, the source of legality was the will of the party leadership, especially Mao Zedong. The party's power derived from its vanguard nature and exclusive access to the supreme Marxist-Leninist truth, as well as from the person of its charismatic leader. The acclaimed objective of governance was the completion of the revolutionary class struggle, and to lead China on the road to communism and the building of socialism. The way to achieve social consensus was through the mobilization of the masses in the form of a myriad of economic, political, and ideological campaigns (*yundong* 运动). Hua Guofeng, the successor to the 'great chairman', sought to maintain a hegemonic discourse based on the personality cult of Mao Zedong. Hua's legitimation strategy was to trace the formal rule of the party back to Chairman Mao's guidelines, the source of his power to Mao's will. Hua defined the continuation of the revolution as the aim of his governance. However, besides maintaining the system of mass mobilization and campaigns he tried to build consensus through a gesture to the former party elite by rehabilitating purged

senior cadres during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the re-totalizing efforts of Hua's hegemonic practices, the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution temporarily opened up Chinese politics to alternative interpretations and thus to discursive struggles to define meaning.

- This atmosphere was favorable to the return of the former Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and his circle. A Dengist group was taking shape and began to build a counter-hegemonic discourse by articulating the signifier 'practice is the sole criterion of truth'. The specific implication attached to the phrase was that power goes to those who can interpret the truth of Marxism-Leninism under the current challenges China faces. Emphasizing the importance of practice, Deng indirectly opposed Mao's leadership cult and called for the institutionalization of the rules of the exercise of power. By the end of the 1970s Deng Xiaoping became the paramount leader of the party and his discourse advocating reform and opening up the country became the hegemonic one. The reformist leadership introduced a socialist legal system, the key document of which was the 1982 constitution. The aim of governance, according to Deng Xiaoping's discourse, was to achieve the four modernizations, which ultimately promised an increase in overall living standards. Deng's promise of 'less politics, better life' proved to be an adequate response to the fading enthusiasm for mass movements. Furthermore, the freer intellectual environment, the consolidation of academia, the increasing freedom of enterprise, and the gradual opening up of the economy to foreign capital—mainly of wealthy Chinese expatriates—made it possible to win a wider range of social elites over.
- Hu Yaobang, who took over the party leadership from Hua Guofeng, followed the hegemonic practices of the reform discourse, hence the basis of the legitimacy of his regime was shaped along Deng Xiaoping's lines. The specific feature of Hu's discourse was an attempt to synthesize a new form of Chinese socialism, a radically different socialism from the socialism of Mao's (and Hua's) period. The most significant rearticulations were related to the relationship between the party and the masses and to the formal aspects of the Party's rule: it was claimed that the period of class struggle had come to an end, the official name of the political regime had changed from proletarian dictatorship to people's dictatorship, and the CPC was transformed from a revolutionary vanguard into a party that upholds socialist law and order. However, Hu failed to achieve a balance between various emerging social forces, and in this move, his successor Zhao Ziyang was not much more successful.

- Zhao’s hegemonic practices, which were also conducted in the shadow of Deng’s legitimacy, introduced the concept of ‘the initial stage of socialism’, according to which the most urgent task for the CPC and the PRC was to develop the productive forces and build a socialist commodity economy. In essence, Zhao’s discourse can be interpreted as a response to the activation of the discursive fields, i.e. the emergence of several competing discourses within the party and the broader intellectual elite: such as the conservative discourse on authoritarian leadership; the ‘culture fever’ movement criticizing the perpetuation of feudal legacies in Chinese politics; or the liberals calling for further market-oriented reforms and due political transformation. In this more pluralist political environment, the legality of the party’s rule was deduced from the socialist legal order, which developed further with an increasing emphasis on the guarantee of civil rights. The source of power was the truth of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ first articulated by Zhao. The underlying premise (or myth) of this truth was that the set welfare goals could only be achieved under CPC’s leadership. Zhao’s governance aimed to develop productive forces, further embrace socialist modernization (reform and opening-up) and, consequently, build a moderately prosperous society throughout the country. The social consensus was based on effectiveness in achieving the modernization goals and on the promise of a peaceful, stable, and unified social environment.
- The immediate context of Jiang Zemin’s rise to power was essentially the greatest crisis of the CPC’s hegemony, which had been newly established in 1978. To integrate pluralizing subject positions and social interests, Jiang Zemin carried out a gradual political reform during his 13-year leadership. From 1997, he began to refer to the political regime of the PRC as socialist or people’s democracy, relegating the concept of the people’s dictatorship to the background, while his statements emphasized the ethos of the party’s political commitment: serving the people. The culmination of the reform was the articulation of the three represents and the institutional changes that accompanied it. Jiang’s new ideological contribution created a ruling party committed to the Leninist party organization, while at the same time including private economic actors in the lines of the party, and it also strengthened the role of ideological work in uniting the party elite. The principle of conformity to the socialist legal order was further emphasized to uphold legality, but after the 1997 National Congress of the CPC, the idea of *governing by law*—essentially meant that the laws were the instruments of party rule—also became a standard moment of the official discourse. Basically, its function

was to ensure the stability of the party's dominance, but it was claimed that it was the guarantee of political stability in the country. The source of power in Jiang's discourse was deduced on the one hand, from the basic premise that the party alone could maintain the stability and order that were the prerequisites for further development (as implicated by Deng Xiaoping Theory); on the other hand, from representative power, as by the late 1990s the CPC had also taken the position of the sole representative of the national interest. The governance goals under Jiang Zemin were to ensure the conditions for a more balanced economic development, to strengthen and improve socialist culture, and to increase 'the overall national strength' of the PRC. The latter refers to the growing importance of foreign policy since the overall national strength is the measure of the aggregate (military, economic, cultural, ideological, etc.) power of nation-states and the primary object of great power competition according to the CPC's discourse. Under Jiang, state nationalism became the primary means of winning over the masses and strengthening the otherwise increasingly fragile social consensus.

- Hu Jintao, who came to power in 2002, almost immediately rearticulated the 'important thought of the three represents'. He rather introduced the principle of 'three for the people', which meant a growing emphasis on the need to reach out to the people and prioritize improvements in social policy and governing capabilities. The legal framework for the exercise of power in Hu Jintao's discourse was also governing by law, but this was complemented by the classical ideal of the legitimate exercise of power, namely moral leadership. As a result, the CPC's leadership character also took on a new connotation: Hu spoke of a party 'serving the public interest and governing together with the people, for the people'. The source of the party's power was the myth that it has exclusive access to the truth of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which, according to the General Secretary's 2012 report, is considered a scientific reference point guiding the laws, development goals, and subject areas of China's modernization. The government goals set by Hu Jintao were the construction of a harmonious socialist society and the related promotion of a scientific outlook on development, i.e. the promotion of social and economically sustainable development. The complementary hegemonic exercise that characterized Hu's discourse was explicitly aimed at increasing party support and popularity. On the one hand, Hu could build on performance-based legitimacy, as economic growth had reached a remarkable average of 10% per year; on the other hand, through his people-centered populism, he articulated the concerns of the

most vulnerable social groups (e.g. migrant workers) and the problems directly felt by the masses via the official discourse.

- Since 2012, General Secretary Xi Jinping has derived the legality of the CPC rule from ‘the socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics’ which combines the principles of moral and legal governance (i.e. the traditional and the modern forms of state dominance). Interestingly, since the 2017 National Congress of the CPC, the authority of the Xi regime has been deduced from the ‘truth’ of his own ideological contribution: Xi Jinping’s Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for the New Era. This hegemonic practice together with the faster-than-ever canonization of Xi’s contribution to party ideology can be understood as an extreme form of creating the totalizing social myth. The objective of governance under Xi has also been recalibrated: the goal Xi has set is ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’. Although the *topos* of national rejuvenation is not new in the official discourse —Jiang Zemin’s discourse had already articulated it— Xi Jinping’s version directly connected the reconciliation of popular nationalist and governmental demands for the restoration of China’s international importance and great power status to the development of the overall national strength (especially the military aspect of it) and the fulfillment of the previously defined objectives of socialist modernization, i.e. the provision of moderate prosperity for all and the construction of a modern socialist society. Xi’s strategy for acquiring consent is somewhat similar to Hu’s hegemonic practices in the sense that it is built on the appropriation of the ‘excellent traditional culture’. The CPC has now defined itself not only as the main protagonist of the narrative on modern China and the Chinese nation-state but also as the sole heir and transmitter of the ‘5,000-year-old Chinese civilization’. Xi’s discursive ambition, then, is nothing less than to chain the CPC’s hegemony to the Chinese national and cultural identity. Overall, the nationalist ideological and performance-based pillars of legitimacy are brought into a kind of dialectical relationship under the aegis of Chinese exceptionalism in Xi’s discourse: national pride is based partly on the unique achievements of the CPC’s development policy, and partly on the gradual reinforced myth that the CPC is the only possible representative of the national interest.

In sum, if we accept the common perception of the reform and opening-up period that the most important goal of the CPC’s internal reforms, as well as of the restructuring of the state administration, is to retain power and maintain adaptability, then we can identify pragmatism

as the greatest virtue of the CCP leadership. Pragmatism is, in fact, the keyword that the Chinese leadership itself has for some time referred to as the main characteristic of China's development policy identity.

IV. Main References

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V. List of publications on the subject

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