



## Governance and Politics of China

BY TONY SAICH  
 NEW YORK: PALGRAVE, 2002  
 349 PAGES  
 PAPERBACK. ISBN 0-7656-0447-7

**D**uring the past fifty years it was easy for Americans to describe China. About 80 percent of the population lived in the countryside, one could say, and they were the peasants who toiled in the fields. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), we knew from innumerable news reports, controlled all aspects of a person's life and expected complete adherence to the official party line. All things foreign were suspect and foreigners were kept at a distance whenever possible.

The changes engulfing China today have turned our set-piece description on its head. Today it's about 60 percent of the population who remain in the countryside, and even among those, ever greater numbers no longer work in the fields full time, preferring instead to

enjoy the higher wages to be had by working in a light industrial or manufacturing plant somewhere near their village. The action is clearly in the cities, where new urban residents overwhelm beleaguered city services. These days the only thing the CCP never talks about is Communism. Party leaders quite regularly throw about ideas having to do with the importance of economic growth and Chinese culture, in that order. Because of its recent entry into the World Trade Organization, foreigners with their investment ideas and ready cash are likely to be turning up almost anywhere in China, ready to seek out any business opportunity.

With changes taking place so rapidly and affecting virtually every Chinese in some way, we should be especially grateful for

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Tony Saich's new book, *Governance and Politics of China*. He gives us a guide to the People's Republic of China at this time in history. He explains for us in a readable and well-informed way the major currents in social policies, economic reorganizations, new views of the party's role, foreign policy swings, even the challenges posed by an increasingly insecure public and an increasingly unforgiving natural environment.

After a period of study in China just at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976–7), Saich resided in Beijing for five years (1994–9) as the representative of the Ford Foundation in China. He traveled widely within the country during those years, talking with village cadre, energetic entrepreneurs and the academic elite. Speaking in Chinese in his naturally low-key and welcoming manner, Saich listened to their stories of the accelerated changes taking place all about them. He asked for their opinions on issues large and small, and he made note of the wry humor that helps most Chinese, rich and poor alike, keep a sense of equilibrium. Saich's approach is reflected in the information he gives us as he recounts personal anecdotes from visits to farms or factories, as he tells us the latest slang when it seems to capture perfectly some new twist in the social fabric, and in his very up-to-date explanation of what is happening in China now.

Saich lists four main challenges to China in the twenty-first century. First is the environmental challenge. Under Maoism the goal was always toward greater production, with the result that precious water resources were regularly wasted while the extensive use of coal helped to pollute the air in most major cities. The rapid economic growth and urbanization now taking place can only exacerbate the nation's environmental challenges.

The second challenge is that posed by corruption. Power in China has been hierarchically structured, meaning that access to information and to opportunities was given to those who had membership in the CCP. Seeing the widespread corruption that has resulted, the Chinese people are not confident that the CCP, which has benefited so much by selling access to opportunities, will be motivated to reign in corruption. The third challenge comes from the information revolution. Economic growth needs access to information quickly, but the government has traditionally practiced a system of information control where access to information was a privilege of those higher up in the hierarchy. The CCP, somewhat befuddled by the pervasiveness of the Internet, has tried to limit information flows on the Web just as it has always limited the spread of news through the printed media, only with the Internet it's not so easy to do.

Probably the overriding issue that China's leaders must grapple with is how to allow social change to take place while still providing stability. This is the fourth challenge, that of political reform. Saich is clear in saying that the Chinese government wants to slow the pace of social and economic reforms in order to try to control them. But the political system in China as it currently exists is not open to diverse interest groups, and the people do not trust the government, which they continue to see as a tool of the CCP and controlled by a privileged elite.

*Governance and Politics in China* is clearly written, very current and convincingly well balanced in its discussion of today's dynamically evolving China. The book can be profitably used by teachers at several levels. Instructors at the middle school level will most likely use it for their own background reading in order to place in context the issues they want their students to explore. They will need to translate those problems into the vocabulary of middle school students. At the high school, college prep and community college level, appropriate sections of the book could be assigned as core reading for further student work. The book has statistics and organizational tables and adequate factual points, but they never overwhelm the focus on the issue being discussed. Teachers will like the section on further reading because the sources listed there are all very current and accessible. Each chapter contains several "boxes" where Saich recounts some personal vignette or a concise observation on a larger issue. The boxes illustrate for the teachers how useful it can be to ask students to follow reporting about China in the *New York Times*, just as Saich has done. At the university level, both students and instructors will have found a trustworthy, helpful and informative book about China today and its immediate future. ■

**RONALD SULESKI** received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He made his first visit to China in 1976 with a delegation of the National Committee on United States-China Relations. He now works at the Harvard-Yenching Institute.



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