



ASIA MARCANTONI
(edited by)

UNDERSTANDING
CHINESE POLITICS
IN THE 21ST
CENTURY

*Democracy, Society,
and Strategic Ambitions*



EDUCatt

Understanding Chinese Politics in the 21st Century

Democracy, Society, and Strategic Ambitions

EDITED BY
ASIA MARCANTONI



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POLIDEMOS

Centro per lo studio della democrazia
e dei mutamenti politici

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Polidemos (Centro per lo studio della democrazia e dei mutamenti politici) dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore promuove e svolge ricerche sui mutamenti nei sistemi democratici, sulle trasformazioni nelle concezioni della democrazia e sulla dimensione internazionale della democrazia. Polidemos promuove la discussione sulla democrazia operando a più livelli: al livello della ricerca accademica, mediante ricerche originali sul tema dei mutamenti democratici, considerato da differenti prospettive disciplinari e con un'ottica multi-interdisciplinare; al livello della discussione pubblica, mediante prodotti editoriali ed eventi pubblici; al livello della più ampia divulgazione, disseminando i risultati delle proprie ricerche mediante iniziative rivolte a organizzazioni della società civile, insegnanti e cittadini interessati.

Polidemos (Center for the study of democracy and political change) of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart promotes and carries out research on changes in democratic systems, on transformations in conceptions of democracy, and on the international dimension of democracy. Polidemos promotes the discussion of democracy by operating at multiple levels: at the level of academic research, through original research on the subject of democratic change, considered from different disciplinary perspectives and with a multi-interdisciplinary perspective; at the level of public discussion, through editorial products and public events; and at the level of the broadest discussion, disseminating the results of their research through initiatives aimed at civil society organizations, teachers and interested citizens.

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Introduction.

Contemporary China beyond simplifications: critical tools for interpreting the Chinese “New Era”

ASIA MARCANTONI

After more than a decade since the beginning of the so-called “New Era” inaugurated by Xi Jinping in 2012, People’s Republic of China continues to occupy an ambiguous position in global discourse: ever-present in political and media debates but at the same time object of often reductive, polarized, or ideologically oriented representations, China is viewed as a radically “other” system, impervious to comparative analysis, or measured and understood exclusively through Western normative and conceptual models, with equally distorting results.

This volume comes from the need to offer a more detailed and informed – yet accessible – reading of contemporary China, through a track that, while not claiming to be exhaustive, aims to provide readers with useful interpretative tools for understanding the main transformations affecting this global actor, as well as the challenges it faces in the New Millennium. The purpose of this volume, composed of essays written by young researchers, is therefore twofold: on the one hand, providing an up-to-date and scientifically grounded overview of the political, economic, social, and institutional processes that are redefining China’s role domestically and internationally;

on the other, promoting a critical approach, capable of avoiding both the fascination with the so-called “Chinese model” and the systematic suspicion that often characterizes Eurocentric literatures, going instead to the origins of the reasons behind the actions of the current governance.

The figure of the current General Secretary Xi Jinping -central to the political, institutional, economic, and social redefinition of the country in its contemporary order- has represented both continuity and discontinuity with respect to the past decade. In a context marked by growing international tensions, demographic crisis, technological challenges, and internal inequalities, the Chinese leadership has strongly reaffirmed the primacy of the Party, boosting a discourse of legitimacy based on nationalist rhetoric and references to socialist ideology. In this scenario, power is also built through deliberate opacity, which makes it difficult for internal and international observers to find a unique interpretation. In their need to understand, they end up embracing extremely simplistic views. Consider, for example, the much-discussed ‘Chinese Dream’. Evoked since the beginning of Xi’s term, despite originally being a polysemic concept with elusive features, over the course of ten years it has revealed its full potential – proving to be functional both in terms of international projection and internal consensus- leading to interpretations of the country’s role in the global scenario ranging from glorification to demonization.

Although directed at an academic and specialist audience, the volume has been designed as a useful tool for readers who, while not Sinologists with a background in the field, wish to deepen their knowledge and understanding of certain dynamics and internal workings of a global actor that increasingly influences the world’s economic, political, and strategic balances. For this reason, in addition to reflecting on the present to provide elements and tools for understanding contemporary China,

each article yields, from a historical perspective, the dynamics and issues underlying the directions taken in the legal, economic, political-ideological, and social spheres. The contributions collected here therefore aim to offer updated interpretations capable of conveying the complexity of dynamics which – although they often seem specific to a context of traditional cultural and historical specificity- are in fact based on rather understandable reasons and seem to follow general trends that can be seen in the globalized world.

The volume is structured into five thematic sections conceived as fundamental pillars underpinning every society -politics, economics, society, law, and international relations- each of which, using different methodologies, addresses a crucial dimension of the contemporary Chinese system.

In the first section, which is dedicated to politics, Asia Marcantoni analyzes the ideological construction of Xi Jinping's "New Era," questioning the meaning attributed to the concept of "democracy" (*minzhu* 民主) in the official narrative and institutional practices of the Communist Party. The analysis reveals how, with the advent of Xi Jinping, this category has been reconfigured not in a participatory sense, but as a tool of legitimization, serving to strengthen central power. Moreover, it shows how a new conception of democracy is developing that seems to move away from "Chinese democracy"-as it had been conceived and developed since the 19th century- emphasizing the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the guarantor of stability and progress and redefining the relationship between the ruled and rules. In this sense, the historical reconstruction of the meaning of the concept of democracy in China will provide a fundamental basis for understanding the new configuration of the political system, characterized by a vertical strengthening of power and the marginalization of horizontal forms of participation. The analysis also reflects on how

the entire discourse on democracy promoted by the current leadership is not only directed internally within the country, but also externally.

The volume continues with the economic section and with a contribution by Dario Di Conzo, who explores the consequences of demographic aging and labor market transformations, focusing on the resilience of a system in which the transition from accelerated development to the “new normal” implies redistributive choices and growing social tensions. In particular, the essay questions the realization of the so-called “Chinese dream” (*Zhongguo meng*, 中国梦) in dealing with population aging, regional inequalities, and transformations in urban and rural welfare. Retracing history since the economic reform period of 1978 and analyzing demographic changes, workforce shifts, and the diversification of business ownership, Di Conzo highlights how the loss of competitive advantage in labor costs, the intensification of sectoral polarization, and the influence of urbanization on internal migration pose significant challenges for the country’s future economic and social development.

The third section, dedicated to society, features an essay by Yuying Xia, which sheds light on the *hukou* (户口) urban and rural residence registration system, investigating the dynamics that link residence, social status, and access to welfare benefits, and highlighting the increased social tensions as well as the difficulties of reforming the system to overcome them. After providing information about the origins of this system -designed to control migration flows and support urban development- the essay explores how it has effectively become a structural barrier that generates exclusion and inequality. In fact, by creating barriers to access -particularly for migrant workers- to health, social security, and educational services, the *hukou* system generates strong discontent among the population and an urgent need for social and legislative reforms.

Moving on to the legal system, in the fourth section, Guidomaria De Cesare analyzes the difficult coexistence between the assertion of the existence of a supposed Chinese legal exceptionalism and selective openness to Western regulatory models. The essay highlights the contradictions of a legal system (*fazhi*, 法制) in which legal sovereignty is subordinate to political primacy, but which at the same time requires regulatory efficiency and legal certainty. The analysis reveals the interplay between public and private law within the Chinese constitutional system, examining the evolution of the New Civil Code. It also offers a reflection on the issue of judicial independence and the functioning of the People's Procuratorates, and reflects on how the law in China plays a fundamental role not only in maintaining the political hegemony of the Party but also as a field of experimentation for meeting the economic and social needs of the population.

Lastly, the concluding section, dedicated to international relations, features a contribution by Matteo Peccini, who explores the case study of the highway project in Montenegro as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路, *yi dai yi lu*). Following an analysis of the economic and political mechanisms that regulate China's external projection -in this case, in the Midwest- the author attempts to problematize the dominant narratives on Chinese expansion, which range from accusations of creating "debt traps" to claims of win-win cooperation, proposing an interpretation that recognizes both the risks of dependence and the development opportunities offered by the Chinese initiative. The analysis of the "Highway to Nowhere" within the BRI is in fact an emblematic case of how, on the one hand, Montenegro represents a strategic hub for Beijing's influence in the Balkans and, on the other, how China's action in Montenegro is a harbinger of possibilities for the Montenegrin government itself.

In their ensemble, as well as providing interpretative tools for understanding a changing country, the essays of this volume propose looking at China not as an ideological or cultural monolith, but as a dynamic system crossed by tensions, where political, economic, and legal choices are confronted with internal contradictions and global pressures. Reading today's China means accepting the challenge of confronting a reality in constant transformation, where historical continuity is intertwined with discontinuities caused by the management of ever-changing internal and international challenges. In this context, political power strategies -which must be understood within the complexity of social, economic, and international relations- can only be understood by avoiding prejudicial perspectives and binary simplifications, and by adopting a perspective capable of combining analytical pragmatism and critical consciousness. From a broader perspective, this volume stems from the awareness that a comparative approach to the various ideological, political, social, economic, and legal aspects of China is fundamental to mutual understanding and common dialogue, which the contemporary world seems to need increasingly. Understanding China's political, ideological, economic, social, and legal systems is not a matter of mere academic curiosity but a historical necessity: global governance issues such as wars, interactions in trade, investment, intellectual property, environmental regulation, and digital governance all require a thorough understanding also of how China operates, both in practice and ideologically. Supporting in-depth comparative research on political, economic, and social issues, transcending disciplinary boundaries and bringing together experts from various fields of knowledge (language, culture, literature, history, politics, etc.) means recognizing that pluralism is a structural feature of the global order that can no longer be ignored if we want to promote development and mutual

understanding between China and the rest of the world, where the parties are increasingly interconnected.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Polidemos research center at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano for its generosity and for giving me the opportunity to conceive and publish this volume. Sincere gratefulness also extends to Director of the center Damiano Palano for his work, constant support, and trust in the project. Sincere thanks also go to all the authors for their contributions and willingness to cooperate, which have made possible what we hope will be a stimulating interdisciplinary discussion as well as a first -albeit modest- step aimed at overcoming the barriers of departmentalization and promoting exchange and collaboration among colleagues working on Asia, with a particular focus on China. The opportunity to edit a volume dealing with issues as complex as they are relevant is a precious opportunity for me, which I hope can be shared with all readers interested in critically understanding certain aspects of contemporary China.

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More than a decade after Xi Jinping's rise to power, China remains central yet often misunderstood in global debates. Too frequently reduced to polarized narratives or Western conceptual frameworks, its complexity escapes simplified explanations. This volume brings together young scholars from different disciplines to explore the transformations reshaping China's political, economic, social, legal, and international landscape. Through analyses ranging from the redefinition of "democracy" under Xi Jinping to demographic challenges, social inequalities, legal reforms, and new international projections, the book provides fresh insights into the dynamics of power and change in today's China. In a world increasingly defined by interdependence, the essays collected here reject both fascination with the "Chinese model" and suspicion rooted in Eurocentrism, inviting readers to see China as a dynamic system marked by internal and external tensions, historical adaptation, and global interconnection. Combining academic rigor with accessibility, *Understanding Contemporary China* seeks to provide some tools for grasping how contemporary China is redefining itself and, as a result, influencing the global order. Knowing China – its ideas, institutions, and contradictions – is not merely an academic exercise, but a prerequisite for sustaining and cherishing meaningful dialogue and global cooperation.

Asia Marcantoni (1996) is a young scholar at the University of Urbino. She obtained her PhD in Global Studies: Economy, Society, and Law in March 2025 with a thesis on contemporary Chinese political thought, adopting a Conceptual History approach, entitled: *Understanding Democracy in Contemporary China: The "Whole-Process People's Democracy" of Xi Jinping* (Political Discourse, Debates, and New Challenges). She has attended several specialization schools on Chinese and Asian politics and political theory and has participated in various national and international conferences. Her research interests include Asian history and institutions, the history of political thought, global history, and anti-colonial thought. She has developed various studies of contemporary political thought and political philosophy on China and East Asia and has published several articles in Italian journals. She has been a visiting student at New York University, a visiting fellow at the Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School of Harvard University (academic year 2023-2024), and a visiting scholar at Beijing Normal University.

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