

# Introduction: China, a Giant in Transition

This book provides a short introductory overview over some of contemporary China's most pressing questions.

The development of nations consists rather of problems than of achievements. That's why this book deals with the changes underway and the challenges ahead rather than with the accomplishments of the past.

Indeed, there is broad agreement among observers today that China is a giant in transition, if not in crisis. Since the start of the era of the new government under Xi Jinping, reforms that try to address the many unsolved problems of a nation grown all too fast are underway on all levels and in every field: politics, economy, finance, demography, religion. The relation between (Communist) elite and (Confucian) culture is shifting; and so is the one between the government and the population. The balance between majorities and minorities is being cautiously re-considered, including the future of the prevailing Han culture and its standing among other ethnicities.

Meanwhile, the military-industrial complex is rapidly expanding its influence and outreach, thus questioning the concept of "peaceful rising", China's official foreign policy doctrine for the past decades, triggering skepticism among its neighbors like South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

The question is: Will China be able to master the many, and in many ways unprecedented challenges? Will it succeed to balance the all too rapid development of the past years by making it more sustainable—not least by creating new mechanisms of participation? In other words: Will China be able to transit from a "successful society" to a "resilient society"? And will that be possible without the broader inclusion of the population and more constructive relations with the adjacent neighbors and the international financial system still dominated by the West?

The generational power transfer between November 2012 and April 2013 from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping was accompanied by expectations for a "great democratic leap forward" from a "China 2.0" to a "China 3.0" (Mark Leonard). There were hopes for the start of a new wave of liberalization, including a new, more participatory relationship between the government and its citizens and between China and the global family of democracies. But in reality, the power transfer took place against the background of an increasingly problem-ridden domestic situation and a

growingly confrontational attitude towards the outside. An apparently outstandingly successful generation of “Communist-Capitalist” leaders, in its last years plagued by scandals, transferred responsibility to a new generation characterized by mixed expectations and factional infighting. Today, not few international observers doubt that the new leadership has the will or the inner-party power to introduce serious reforms in a country that reported (depending on the statistical method) 90,000–180,000 riots each involving more than 500 persons in public space in 2011 alone.

Overall seen, the China of today seems not only to be a country on the rise, but also a nation in the midst of a domestic change seldom seen since the 1970s. China still cultivates the self-image of a Communist country, but functions and behaves as a capitalist society. The question is if the resulting hope expressed by Chinese dissidents and Western leaders for a rapid development of China’s still largely autocratic political system towards a kind of context-adequate, though probably at least initially illiberal “Confucian” democracy is plausible or not. And the second question is if too rapid a development towards democracy is desirable at all in a country that is too big to risk instability. To express it in other words: Should “rapid democratization” be the strategic goal of China’s leaders and of the West—or rather a step-by-step approach towards the “rule of law” first, and “illiberal democracy” to follow, in order to then proceed to some kind of culturally adequate “democratization”? And: Should the West be more worried about a thriving China, or a China in crisis? Will China’s success contribute to the further peaceful development of the global community and the future world order, or will it become a threat to it? What can the West do to help China develop its own pluralistic and inclusive approaches in order to secure both domestic and international stability? And how can the West strengthen its democratic allies on China’s borders, which are increasingly being both scared of and attracted by the rising new center of gravity in the Pacific?

Many questions to address—with the questions currently more important than the answers. In order to mirror China’s complex situation of transition, this booklet applies a simple structure. While Chap. 1 sketches the main motive of China’s change today, Chaps. 2 to 4 address mainly domestic issues. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with aspects of China’s foreign relations by taking on the examples of Europe and South Korea. Chapter 7 gives a tentative outlook. Chapters 8 and 9 investigate crucial issues of governance and governability between idealism and realism, and expand the questionnaire on the future in conversations with leading China experts both from within China (Chap. 8) and from the outside (Chap. 9). Although some concrete proposals are advanced, the goal is less to provide answers to the many questions raised, but rather to sketch a picture of a complex situation in rapid movement.

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