



The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China

By Joseph Fewsmith

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In the 1990s China embarked on a series of political reforms intended to increase, however modestly, political participation to reduce the abuse of power by local officials. Although there was initial progress, these reforms have largely stalled and, in many cases, gone backward. If there were sufficient incentives to inaugurate reform, why wasn't there enough momentum to continue and deepen them? This book approaches this question by looking at a number of promising reforms, understanding the incentives of officials at different levels, and the way the Chinese Communist Party operates at the local level. The short answer is that the sort of reforms necessary to make local officials more responsible to the citizens they govern cut too deeply into the organizational structure of the party.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Fewsmith's superb new book is a warning against optimistic hopes that China will gradually evolve into a democracy. This warning emerges from the book's telling case studies of failed attempts at local political reforms that had aimed to make officials more accountable to the public. In each case, promising reforms were thwarted by a combination of bureaucratic interests; established organizational principles - it is the Party, not the public, that controls cadres; and entrenched practices such as regular transfers of Party secretaries, which removes reform-minded officials from the scene. Even the most promising experiment in promoting "consultative democracy" turned into "consultative authoritarianism" as elite interests and preferences prevailed. Liberalizing political reform is on the agenda of China's top leaders, but even if they decide to enact such reforms, implementation faces the kinds of impediments illustrated so well in this important study."

Thomas P. Bernstein, Professor Emeritus, Columbia University

"In this marvelous new book, Fewsmith highlights one of the key puzzles of Chinese politics: why do so few local officials experiment with political reforms when so many have experimented with all kinds of economic reforms? He draws on his extensive knowledge of local politics to show how the interplay of the political structure and individual personalities shapes the potential for political reform. He convincingly shows the importance of looking at grassroots dynamics - not just politics in Beijing - to understand the future of China."

Bruce J. Dickson, The Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University

"Why have Chinese local governance reforms failed to curb the arbitrary power of local bosses? Fewsmith's fine survey convincingly shows how the Communist Party's fears of losing control have hamstrung the reforms, and thereby lost the Party the opportunity to put its authority on a more solid footing. Let's hope the book is translated into Chinese and its lessons learned by future Party leaders."

Susan L. Shirk, School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, University of California, San Diego

"Joseph Fewsmith, one of America's best-informed China watchers, reads widely in Chinese. Over the past six years, he has traveled around many regions of China to see how badly needed reforms are proceeding. He has found that they have not succeeded, and here he tells us why."

Ezra Vogel, Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences Emeritus, Harvard University

"In recent years, grass-roots political reforms in China have drawn much hopeful attention in the West ... But Fewsmith's careful analyses of roughly a dozen such experiments show that none was democratic in the Western sense."

Andrew J. Nathan, Foreign Affairs

"A leading scholar on China, Fewsmith examines the important reforms undertaken in China since the 1990s, ranging from inner-party democracy to deliberative democracy/consultative authoritarianism ... this book excels in presenting specific instances of reform in China through the author's extensive field trips and research there. Moreover, it answers an important question regarding China's future and will be beneficial for students and scholars of Chinese political reforms, China's democratization, and China studies. Summing up: recommended. Upper-division undergraduate, graduate, and research collections."

X. Li, Choice

About the Author

Joseph Fewsmith is Professor of International Relations and Political Science at Boston University. He is the author of *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao* (2008), which is the second edition of *China since Tiananmen* (2001); *Elite Politics in Contemporary China* (2001); *The Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (1994); and *Party, State, and Local Elites in Republican China: Merchant Organizations and Politics in Shanghai, 1980-1930* (1985). He is the editor of *China Today*, *China Tomorrow* (2010) and co-editor, with Zheng Yongnian, of *China's Opening Society* (2008). He is very active in the China field, traveling to China frequently and presenting papers at professional conferences such as the Association for Asian Studies and the American Political Science Association. His articles have appeared in such journals as *The China Quarterly*, *Asian Survey*, *The Journal of Contemporary China*, *Modern China* and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. He is one of seven regular contributors to *China Leadership Monitor*, a quarterly web publication analyzing current developments in China. He is also an associate of the John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies at Harvard University and of the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer Range Future at Boston University.

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