Many different conceptual approaches and models have been used to analyze contemporary Chinese history and politics. Some of the more commonly used include “totalitarianism,” “two-line struggle,” “clientelism,” “tendency analysis,” “political culture,” “interest group politics,” “bureaucratic politics,” “corporatism,” “civil society,” “fragmented authoritarianism,” etc. (Brødsgaard 1989; Guo 2013). This paper will survey these approaches in order to place the analysis of contemporary Chinese politics and history in a comparative perspective. A survey of the field will remind us that contemporary China studies have increasingly developed into a collective effort and that no scholar conducts his/her research in a vacuum devoid of debt to other contributions in the field. The paper will focus on the period since the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, we will not attempt a discussion of the totalitarian model which heavily dominated the China field in the 1950s.

### Tendency Models

Tendency analysis derives its name from an important article by Franklyn Griffiths which took issue with the interest group approach to the study of Soviet politics (Griffiths, 1971). Griffiths argues that the interest group approach assumes that the policy formation process is to be understood in terms of the interaction of subsystems such as interest groups, government institutions, and political leadership. He suggests that the process rather should be viewed from the perspective of a *system dominant* conflict of tendencies. By tendencies he means “alternate possible directions of value allocation ...” or “pattern(s) of articulation associated with a loose coalition of actors operating at different levels of the political structure whose articulation tend in the same direction but who are unlikely to be aware of the common thrust and consequences of their activity” (Griffiths, 1971: 336, 358).

Griffiths also argues that if we look for patterns of articulation on specific issues, “we find signs of shared outlooks and claims which cut across formal groups.” In sum, in Griffith’s view informal groups based on tendencies (informal opinion groups) assume greater relevance for policy making than formal aggregates (interest groups).

There were four main forms of tendency analyses in the China field: Mao in command, two line struggle, three line struggle, and four line struggle. The Mao in command approach presents a pattern of a policy-making process guided and dominated by the thoughts of Mao Zedong. The best example of this type of analysis is volume two of Roderick MacFarquhar’s three volume study of the origins of the Cultural Revolution. Here he describes a political process with Mao as the dominant figure involved in all major policy changes.

The two-line struggle model posits that there are two basic and competing tendencies in the polity. According to the ideal-type Western two-line approach the opposing two lines or camps are called “moderate,” “pragmatists” or “Luiists” on the one hand and “radicals,” “ideologues” or “Maoists” on the other. The radical (Maoist) orientation assigns highest priority to continuing ideological and social change (“uninterrupted revolution”). It stresses mobilization, political campaigns and class consciousness and opposes elitism, routinized administration and expertise and professionalism. In contrast the conservative (Luiist) orientation assigns highest
priority to economic development and relatively orderly social change and opposes the Maoist notion of “uninterrupted revolution.” According to the ideal-type Western two-line approach, major shifts in policy follow an oscillating pattern between the radical and the conservative tendency.  

The western two-line struggle approach is closely associated with the two-line struggle model that was used by Chinese media and analysts to explain the origin as well as the development of the Cultural Revolution in China. According to the dominant official Chinese line at the time, Chinese politics was dominated or determined by a fundamental struggle between the revisionist or bourgeois line represented by Liu Shaoqi and the revolutionary line represented by Mao Zedong. The struggle had continued since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 and in fact reflected continued class struggle in society. The class struggle version of the two-line struggle approach became influential in European China scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s. It especially had a strong impact on the discussion on transitional societies which emerged in the late 1960s (Bettelheim, 1973; Poulain, 1977). To the European left the Cultural Revolution in China seemed to prove that the Chinese had invented a road towards classless communist society which significantly differed from its Soviet counterpart in that it apparently did not replicate the terror and repression associated with Stalinism, but rather built on the activities and consciousness of the broad working masses (Robinson, 1969; Blumer, 1968). In the USA the works of the European leftwing theorists and the class struggle interpretation of Chinese politics inspired the works of the very active group of young scholars around the journal Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars.

To advocates of the class struggle model, the sudden arrest of the Gang of Four by Hua Guofeng in October 1976 came as a shock. An immediate reaction among some of the more prominent European adherents of the two-line class struggle model was to claim that Hua Guofeng and his allies had committed a coup d’etat and were betraying Mao’s political legacy (Bettelheim, 1978). However, it soon became evident that Hua Guofeng continued to uphold key Maoist policies, even after the removal of the Gang of Four. Moreover, when Deng Xiaoping experienced a new rehabilitation in July 1977, a picture of policy differences between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping emerged.

One year after the fall of the Gang of Four, the German scholar, Jürgen Domes, launched a fundamental criticism of the two-line class struggle model and opened a line of inquiry which broke away from the Chinese self-perception of Chinese politics. He did this in a path breaking article in The China Quarterly analyzing the fall of the Gang of Four and the rise of Hua Guofeng (Domes, 1977). Domes suggested that Chinese politics was dominated by the interaction of “varying, issue-based coalitions of opinion groups.” These opinion groups are usually limited to short-term cooperation, whereas factions are program-oriented coalitions of opinion groups formed on the basis of alternative policy platforms and competing claims for political power. They are normally not limited in their time perspective. Domes posited that opinion groups solidify into factions when elite conflict escalates into a stage where the consensus on issues as well on the procedures breaks down among the elite. The resulting stage of conflict resolution led to the expulsion from the Party of the defeated faction’s leaders. Domes claimed that the political system of the PRC was a “transitional crisis system” which, among other things, was characterized by repeated cycles of group formation—faction condensation—conflict resolution—group formation.

In emphasizing the role of opinion groups, Domes still operated within the tendency analysis framework. However, by arguing that these opinion groups in certain situations would solidify into factions where personal networks played an important role, he connected tendency analysis with factional analysis.

Although the two-line struggle model lost its dominant position in Western China scholarship, tendency analysis as such continued to be applied. One variant is an approach positing the
existence of three basic policy positions. One of the more influential examples was that of Dorothy Solinger who identified three separate stances on a range of issues within the policy making elite on how to develop the economy: a readjustment group that advocated the readjustment of sectoral relationships in the economy in favor of light industry and agriculture; the reformers who favored decentralization of the economic system and the use of market principles; and the conservers who upheld central planning and the priority of heavy industry in economic growth (Solinger, 1982).

In principle, tendency analysis is not limited to one, two or even three policy stances. Thus David Bachman has identified six varieties or strains of conservatism in the Chinese polity (Bachman, 1988). These forms of conservatism are: financial, planning, moral, ideological, vested interest, and anti-foreignness. Financial conservatism emphasizes a balanced budget and a balanced foreign trade. Planning conservatism stresses an economic development strategy based on heavy-industrial production and high rates of investment. Moral conservatism is concerned with norms of behavior. Ideological conservatism upholds the leading role of the Party in politics and literature and arts. Vested interest conservatism argues that it is important to keep existing institutions and organizations, including those of the Party, intact. Anti-foreign conservatism maintains that contact with the outside world is corrupting Chinese values. According to Bachman, these different strands of conservatism not only represent different policy programs, but they can also be associated with different institutional structures and systems.

It is still possible today to find examples of tendency analysis. Ezra Vogel’s monumental work on Deng Xiaoping is based on a Mao in command model transformed into a Deng in command model (Vogel, 2011). Vogel describes Deng’s actions and ideas and their importance for China’s modern transformation. Another example is Kerry Brown’s study of Hu Jintao, which looks at his early life and entry into politics, evaluates his stewardship of the economy and discusses his ideological contributions (Brown, 2012). Brown modifies the model in Hu’s case depicting a Hu Jintao who is less powerful among his peers than both Mao and Deng and perhaps even Jiang Zemin and is better characterized as first among equals.

All versions of tendency analysis exhibit a number of common features. They posit that policy outcomes are generated by the interaction between distinct policy platforms and that policy articulations is the key stage in the policy making process. Tendency analysis, as developed by Griffiths, also assumes that each policy platform (or articulated tendency) is widely spread throughout the political system. Finally, tendency analysis holds that political actors behave in a rational way and that Chinese leaders take their own rhetoric seriously.

Tendency analysis as applied to China assumes that political outcomes are generated primarily by the interaction of different distinct policy platforms rather than the interplay of competing individuals, groups, or institutions. This assumption has been challenged by the two major structural approaches to Chinese politics: the interest group model and the bureaucratic politics model. Both models contend that structural factors in the form of interest groups or bureaucratic agencies are constraints, if not determining factors, in actual policy-making.

**Interest Groups**

An interest group approach relevant to state-socialist countries was first developed by Gordon Skilling. He defines an interest group as “an aggregate of persons who possess certain common characteristics and share certain attitudes on public issues, and who adopt distinct positions on these issues and make definite claims on those in authority” (Skilling, 1973).

Skilling admits that the power of ultimate decision-making lies in a very small group of leaders at the highest level of the system (politbureau). However, interest groups may be able to exert serious influence on decisions by articulating the policy options that are confronting the
policy makers at the apex of the power pyramid. Moreover, individual leaders often identify themselves with such groups and act in accordance with interest group wishes. In this sense, the polity is “subsystem dominant.” It is precisely here that the two co-editors of the volume on *Interest Groups in the Soviet Union* disagree, in that Franklyn Griffiths argues for an analysis based on a system dominant (rather than subsystem dominant) conflict of tendencies (Griffiths, 1971).

In the field of China studies, Michel Oksenberg was the first to apply an interest group approach (Oksenberg, 1968). He examined the interest and power of seven occupational groups in Chinese society: peasants, industrial managers, workers, intellectuals, students, party and government officials, and the military. Oksenberg concluded that these groups exercise a determining influence on Chinese politics.

It was not until 1984 that the interest group approach to Chinese politics could muster a whole volume. The anthology *Groups and Politics in the People’s Republic of China* is in many ways an equivalent to Skilling’s and Griffith’s study on the Soviet Union (Goodman, 1984). Thus the main part of the volume is organized around the following interest groups: economists, provincial first party secretaries, teachers, peasants, workers, intellectuals, and the military.

Most of these groups are also the object of study in a later volume on the role of interest groups in Chinese politics entitled *Citizens and Groups in Contemporary China* (Falkenheim, 1987). However both volumes carry contributions that question the usefulness of the interest group approach. The reason is that it is still not clear what interest groups in communist societies are and how they act. It is also unclear through which channels they exert their influence. Moreover, interest groups are not officially allowed to organize as they represent a kind of pluralism which the Party-state cannot accept. In fact, it often seems that many of the so-called interest groups are part of the state apparatus and have little or no contact with individuals or groups outside the state. Nevertheless, the concept of interest group is often used to analyze leadership constellations that are assumed to share common interests due to shared work experiences and social background. Studies assuming that interest groups play an important role in Chinese politics have increased in numbers in recent years. However, the methodological and theoretical problems of defining interest groups and identifying how they articulate their interest still remain. Scholars therefore often assume their existence without providing analytic clarity. The recent debate on vested interests and the need for SOE (state owned enterprises) reform in China has the potential of reviving the interest group approach. In fact Chinese scholars are increasingly using the interest group concept, albeit also without it having any clear definition and theoretical content (Sheng and Zhao, 2013).

**Factionalism**

Due to the difficulties in defining interest groups in China, many scholars have instead used the concept of factions to denote that there are various distinct groups that interact in Chinese politics and that policy processes and outcomes are decided by the interaction of these groups. Often these groups are defined on the basis of clientelist ties. Andrew Nathan was the first who in a systematic way proposed to study Chinese politics from the perspective of the clientelist model. In 1973 he published an ambitious and thought-provoking so-called factionalism model for understanding Chinese politics (Nathan, 1973). The concept of the “clientelist tie” underlies Nathan’s factional model. The clientelist tie is defined as a personalized, reciprocal relationship involving well-understood rights and obligations between two partners (Schmidt et al., 1977). The two partners exchange resources (gifts and services) in mutually beneficial, albeit asymmetrical transactions.
It is Nathan’s conclusion that each major CCP leader develops a personal network of clientelist ties to form a personal faction, placing his followers in important positions and using them and their personal connections to further his own standing within the Party vis-à-vis other leaders. In sum, it is Nathan’s view that Chinese elite politics is most convincingly seen in terms of factionalism.

Nathan’s model did not have an immediate wider impact in the China field. A major reason seems to be that the model does not illuminate the role of policy issues or tendencies in the Chinese political process. Thus Oksenberg and Goldstein argue that the factional approach suffers from a major weakness in that it does not “illuminate either the problems with which the leaders seem conscientiously to be wrestling or China’s distinctive path of development” (Oksenberg and Goldstein, 1974). In their view policy issues and policy choices posed by the Chinese development path determine the parameters and the opportunities for the exercise of power and not the other way around. To them the tendency approach was to be preferred.

However, in a longer term perspective the factionalism model has exerted huge influence on the China field. In an influential study from 1981 Lucian Pye adopted a position quite similar to Andrew Nathan’s (Pye, 1981). He argued that the struggle for power among competing leadership factions underlies Chinese politics. Faction formation occurs in response to the search for career security and the protection of power rather than as a result of a dispute over policy issues within the Chinese elite. Thus he disregarded the usefulness of the tendency analysis approach. Instead, particular distributions of political beliefs, attitudes, values, and socio-psychological orientations become more important for deciding political behavior and action.

Others have also applied the clientelist model. Jean Oi has done it in a study of the peasant relationship with local leaders (Oi, 1985). Andrew Walder has documented that patron-client ties dominate labor relations in Chinese factories (Walder, 1986), and Merle Goldman has shown that the patron-client model best characterizes relations between intellectuals and top leaders in China (Goldman, 1981).

A survey of the field will show that a majority of recent studies on Chinese elite politics adopt some form of a factional analysis. Usually this is based on the assumption of ascriptive characteristics. Cheng Li assumes that Chinese politics is dominated by two distinct groups: the populists and the elitists. The populist faction form a common identity based on their shared work in the communist youth league (Li, 2009). The elitist faction or prince-lings are bound together in a faction by way of their heritage as sons and daughters of high-level cadres. Bo Zhiyue has worked out a so-called power balancing model based on factional affiliations (Bo, 2007). Victor Shih assumes a major factional divide between a central technocratic faction and a dominant generalist faction with followers in the provinces (Shih, 2007).

It can be argued that the assumption that Chinese politics is determined by the interaction of various factions suffers from the difficulty in verifying that persons who have once worked together in the same organization, have shared educational experiences, or that they come from the same elite strata and will uphold the same stance on policy issues. Moreover, the increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization of Chinese society seems to indicate that perhaps institutions play a stronger role than personal networks. This insight is better captured in the bureaucratic politics model.

**Bureaucratic Politics**

The bureaucratic politics approach was originally developed by Graham Allison in his by now classic work on the Cuban missile crisis (Allison, 1971). The bureaucratic politics model builds on the fundamental assumption that political leaders will bargain (“pull and haul”) to reach an outcome favorable to the organization whose interest they represent. This kind of behavior is
epitomized in Allison’s famous dictum: “where you stand depends on where you sit.”

Leaders of bureaucracies try to maximize their own organization’s bureaucratic interests, and in doing so, they seek to promote their own organization’s “health,” often measured in terms of their budget, independence, size, etc. In actual decision-making, according to this line of thought, bureaucratic agencies influence policy outcome via their representatives in the decision-making elite (the politbureau). In short, policy-making is the result of hard bargaining among top leaders representing different bureaucratic interests. This had a great appeal to the “China is a normal country” crowd but less so to the “China is China” advocates.

As applied to China, the bureaucratic model seems to coincide neatly with the bureaucratic behavior of Chinese officials and institutions. Moreover, the model’s applicability to Chinese politics draws strength from the legacy of the Chinese past. For centuries a complex bureaucracy ruled China. Thus a bureaucratic approach to contemporary Chinese politics gains the principal advantage of first, coinciding with a widely observed pattern of bureaucratic behavior, and secondly, indicating continuity with the Chinese past.

Already in 1967, A. Doak Barnett documented the important role of bureaucratic systems in Chinese politics (Barnett, 1967). Similarly, David Lampton in his studies of the Chinese healthcare sector emphasized the importance of bureaucratic institutions in the Chinese political process (Lampton, 1977). In the 1980s, the study of bureaucratic structures and processes received renewed emphasis through A. Doak Barnett’s analysis of the making of Chinese foreign policy and Michel Oksenberg and Kenneth Lieberthal’s study of policy-making in China with special reference to bureaucracies in the energy sector (Barnett, 1985; Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). David Lampton also further investigated how policy formulation as well as implementation are formed and shaped by the institutional context (Lampton, 1987). An influential study within the bureaucratic politics approach is Susan Shirk’s study on how the path of change during the reform era has been structured by bureaucratic politics and bureaucratic bargaining (Shirk, 1993). More recently Xuguang Zhou has analyzed bureaucratic career patterns from the perspective of bureaucratic politics (Zhou, 2001). There are also recent examples within the field of Chinese foreign policy (Liou, 2009).

Compared to interest group analysis, the bureaucratic politics approach has the advantage of dealing with structures and institutions that can be identified. It is also strengthened by the fact that regular administrative reform has high priority and is specifically directed towards determining organizational strength and size in various agencies and organizations.

Corporatism

Some scholars have argued that rather than functional division among competing interest groups, the Chinese political system should be seen as a system in which major functional interest groups are incorporated or co-opted into the policy-making process by a strong and active state. Similar to interest group politics, scholars in the China field applying the corporatist model originally were influenced by concepts and ideas tried out in studies of the Soviet Union. In an early study, Bunce and Echols preferred the concept to that of interest groups or institutional pluralism because of its emphasis on the role of the state in four main areas (Bunce and Echols, 1980). First, the state takes an active part in the decision-making process. Interest groups are not independent or autonomous actors as assumed by the interest group approach, rather they are brought together by the state in active cooperation for the “common good.” Functional interest groups do not compete with each other in constant rivalry as is the case in pluralist political systems. In corporatism, consensus and harmony are the watchwords. Secondly, the functional interest groups and the state work together through the planning process and other forms of systematic decision-making. In fact, a “corporatist system will not
accept an absence of planning.” Thirdly, in a corporatist system the masses are guaranteed a minimal standard of living by the government through income policies, transfers and social services. In the liberal corporatist system, the masses are protected by a welfare state. Fourthly, a corporatist system features explicit goals, and the system is set up to achieve the realization of these ends. The goals are economic growth and political, economic and social stability.

Oskar Weggel represents an early European application of corporatism on Chinese politics (Weggel, 1985). He argues that corporatism co-opts management and labor into a coalition with the state. In fact, state, capital, management, labor and technology are interlocked in a close network of mutual cooperation. Another key characteristic is that bureaucracy and organizations (especially trade unions) do not oppose each other, but work together in solving conflicts.

Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan have contributed to the discussion on the applicability of the corporatist notion by an article where corporatism in China is seen in a wider East Asian perspective (Unger and Chan, 1995). They argue that associational activity in China is tied to or controlled by the state. Jean Oi has used the concept in her study of local state-business relations in China. She finds that local governments have assumed many characteristics of a business corporation, with local officials acting similar to a board of directors. This merger of state and economy at the local level is a new institutional development which she labels local state corporatism (Oi, 1992).

Scott Kennedy argues that key characteristics of corporatism do not fit with the Chinese reality. Chinese associations do have limited autonomy, but they are not compulsory and they do not appear to have jurisdictional monopolies. Moreover, national-level associations do not have authority over local associations (Kennedy, 2005). Yep Rey also shows a divergence between the political reality in China and the corporatist prescription, although he admits that corporatism offers more potential than the civil society approach in providing insights into state-society relations in China (Yep, 2000). This is because corporatism is more consistent with the Party-state’s emphasis on coordination and the harmonization of social interests and state goals. Bruce Dickson argues that for new social forces such as the private entrepreneurs “the desire to be within the system is stronger than the desire for autonomy” (Dickson, 2000: 526). Entrepreneurs are partners of the state, not adversaries of it, and it is in their interest to be co-opted by the state. In his view both cooptation and corporatism are having positive impacts on the Chinese economy, but neither is likely to lead to a transformation of China’s political system (Dickson, 2000: 518).

The corporatist approach stresses cooptation, coordination, social stability and harmony and licensed social associations. It posits that the state is able to control new social forces by creating dependency relationships. Corporatism is not so good at analyzing the creation of social space and the emergence of divergent interests. This is done better by other approaches such as those of bureaucratic politics and civil society.

However, an edited volume has recently appeared which indicates that the corporatist approach is not “dead,” when considering China, but can be further developed by contextualizing the societal, economic and political conditions. The editors point out that it can be useful to use a corporatist framework when attempting to understand the Chinese state’s transformation and its changing relationship with new social and economic stakeholders (Hsu and Hasmath, 2013).

**Civil Society**

The Chinese political system is plainly dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. A change in the system would entail fundamental changes of the role of the CCP and vice versa. Such
change was predicted in 1989–1990 in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre, when many scholars predicted that the Chinese Communist Party would disintegrate as it had lost its legitimacy. This scenario was further reinforced with the implosion of the Soviet state and the Soviet Communist Party’s loss of power. Influenced by these events, Western scholarship on China began to focus on civil society, private sector development, central-local tensions, migrants, and other marginalized groups—in short on the centrifugal forces in Chinese society rather than on the forces that hold the system together and make it work. The intense search for a civil society in China that emerged in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre was clearly directed by a belief that the days of the Chinese political system were numbered and that it was important to identify the sprouts that might bring this about. Consequently, the discussion mostly took place from within a Havelian discourse which had taken its inspiration from the East European and Soviet transition to post-communism.

Consequently, the discussion mostly took place from within a Havelian discourse which had taken its inspiration from the East European and Soviet transition to post-communism. Here state-society relations are seen as a zero-sum game: the stronger the society, its institutions and its organizations, the weaker the state and vice versa. The Havelian version of the civil society approach also assumes a certain autonomy on the part of the newly emerging social forces and groups. They constitute an autonomous space that the state does not control and that will force a retreat of the state from society, if allowed to develop. The formation of non-government associations (shetuan) in China has been taken as an indication that a civil society is emerging. However, the political and social impact of the shetuan is limited since they must register with a branch or organ of the official administrative setup or their affiliated institutions and organizations. As a consequence, instead of the autonomous space of spontaneously formed associations, the state plays a strong role in establishing and managing these associations.

A defining characteristic of civil society is a vibrant public sphere. Therefore, in addition to the formation of active and independent social associations, a civil society should have a relatively independent sphere of public debate. In Europe Jürgen Habermas traces the origins of a public sphere back to the 18th century where the emerging bourgeoisie would meet in teahouses and discuss public issues, while sipping their tea or coffee (Habermas, 1991). Later in the century, newspapers, books and printed media also became an important and defining part of a public sphere.

In China, Party and state control of the media and the publishing houses severely restrict independent public debate. Moreover, many newspapers and magazines are internal (neibu) and therefore not part of the public realm. The Party keeps a vigilant eye on the media and does not allow the publication of books, magazines and newspapers that are not formally registered and therefore do not have a license to publish.

However, in recent years a vibrant discussion and information forum have developed on the Chinese internet. Chinese micro-blogging services such as Sina weibo, Tencent weibo and Sohu weibo are the fora for millions of Chinese micro-bloggers who write about almost anything from personal matters to government misuse of power. The Party tries to control these services and will occasionally delete internet accounts if the debate becomes too critical. But bloggers who are having their accounts closed, open new ones under new names and the Party is having great trouble in imposing its censorship. The Chinese internet debate could be perceived as a form of public debate. However, the debate rarely takes the form of sustained discussion on political issues. The Party-state also tries to influence the internet discussion by having interventions posted that praise the current regime and take the debate into well-known territory.

There is no doubt that western analysts have overestimated the strength and independence of a civil society in China. One example is the so-called “small government, big society” experiment in Hainan island, which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Liao Xun, who originally coined the concept “small government, big society,” saw it as a way of conceptualizing administrative reform and only in 1994 did he publish an article explicitly making the link
between “small government, big society” and civil society. This happened after he had become acquainted with the western debate on civil society. However, Western scholars were quick to jump to the conclusion that the “small government, big society” experiment was an example of civil society unfolding in China (Brødsgaard, 2009).

In sum, the Party effectively controls state and society and the interaction between them. It will not allow an independent public sphere to emerge which can challenge the Party’s monopoly on setting the agenda for public debate. Associations are, in general, not independently formed and in opposition to the government. They are often formed as a result of state initiatives or they are licensed by the state to perform their activities. It is clearly difficult to identify a civil society in the Havelian sense.

It has been argued that the fixation on the autonomy of civil associations hampers analysis and that not even many Western organizations would meet this criterion. Many Chinese associations often intentionally blur distinctions to the state and often empirical evidence indicates that state and civil society are interwoven, not clearly separated. Some scholars in fact argue that associational activities thrive in presence of a strong state (Salmenkari, 2013: 698).

A vibrant civil society requires active citizenship and social interaction. This kind of sociability or horizontality seems to be missing in the Chinese case. Many associations prioritize their relations with officials, state organizations or international donors more than horizontal contacts with their constituencies or other associations. In this sense, Chinese associational activity often lacks strength and density (Salmenkari, 2013: 706).

Partha Chatterjee’s distinction between political society and civil society in India may also be relevant in the Chinese case (Chatterjee, 2011). According to Chatterjee, Indian civil society is weak and co-opted by the state. Civil society consists of the middle class and other groups who are not in strong opposition to the state. The poor and disadvantaged, however, are not part of civil society but instead articulate their interest in political society. They are in constant conflict with the state which often acts arbitrarily which Chatterjee says, may be better for the poor and powerless in some cases than the rule of law, or rule by law. As a result, sometimes these groups also see the law as an enemy, as the law is used by the powerful to uphold and reproduce their domination. So the struggle takes place between political society and the state, not state and civil society. The poor and dispossessed are not treated as legitimate and rights-bearing members of civil society who abide by law, but as a huge pile of exceptions to the normal application of the law (Chatterjee, 2011: 14). So there is the narrow domain of civil society and the wide domain of political society (Chatterjee, 2011: 13).

In the Chinese case, civil society is also weak. First of all, the many associations that have emerged are almost all established and managed in cooperation with the state. Often their bianzhi is fixed by the state and their leaders appointed or salaried by the state. The many articulations of protest and opposition on the part of peasants whose land has been confiscated by corrupt local officials, citizens whose daily environment has been polluted by lax environmental rule, etc., are not represented and organized by civil society organizations; they take place in political society. Often the central state will intervene in local conflicts on the side of the protesters and make exceptions to general regulations or administrative practices. In this sense political outcomes often appear as the result of negotiations that take place in political society. In sum, an authoritarian political order appears to be combined with increased fragmentation of the policy process not only at the top and middle but also at the bottom where the state tries to co-opt and/or or crush local rebellions of political society.

Resilient Authoritarianism

During the late 1990s it became clear that the Chinese political system was not about to break
down and the CCP was not likely to disappear. In fact, by the early 2000s, it was obvious that the Party had in fact undergone a process of renewal and revitalization. As a result of this process the Party and its governing apparatus had become much younger, better qualified and technically more competent than during the Mao era. The realization of this prompted a renewed attention to structural models and explanations. By the early 2000s, the Party was brought back into the field of China studies, as it was realized that there had been too much focus on centrifugal forces and that studies on what made China hold together had been neglected (Brødsgaard and Zheng, 2004). In 2003 Andrew Nathan published an article where he argued that the Chinese political system was stable and resilient (Nathan, 2003). The Party was not going to go away in the near future, but had in fact consolidated its grip over Chinese society. He characterized this system as resilient authoritarianism. Scholars such as David Shambaugh and Bruce Dickson, who previously would argue that the CCP was losing its capacity and legitimacy to rule and was experiencing steady decay, now also emphasized the resilience of the system (Shambaugh 2008; Dickson 2003).

**Beyond Resilient Authoritarianism**

Recently, the concept of resilient authoritarianism has been questioned. Shambaugh who in his book on the Party argued for its resilience and adaptive capacity, has changed his view and now finds that the Party is obstructing necessary political reform (Shambaugh, 2012). In an article in *The China Quarterly*, Cheng Li challenges the concept arguing that the CCP’s “resilient authoritarianism” is “a stagnant system, both conceptually and empirically.” The concept reflects a monolithic conceptualizing of China which fails to capture seemingly transformative trends in the Chinese polity. There are three parallel sets of characteristics: (1) weak leaders, strong factions; (2) weak government, strong interest groups; (3) weak party, strong country (Li, 2012). They reflect that China has become increasingly pluralistic with the arrival of many new socio-political players and a more complicated political decision-making process. As a consequence, dynamic change is underway which will lead to democratization and the Party’s loss of power. In a longer term perspective China is resilient, not the CCP.

In a recent issue of *Journal of Democracy* Nathan also argues that China is at the tipping point (Nathan, 2013). However, he cautions that fundamental change continues to be unlikely as, “Small farmers are unhappy, but they live scattered across the countryside and far from the center of power. Worker unrest has increased, but it focuses on enterprises, not the government. Intellectuals are weak as a class, divided, and unable to spark resistance. Civil society is growing in scale and potential assertiveness, but remains under effective government surveillance and unable to form national linkages. Independent entrepreneurs have ideas and means, and show increasing initiative, but their stake in stability makes them cautious. The broad middle class sees through the regime, but is busy enjoying itself .... When it comes to defecting from the existing order, each group seems likely to look at the others and pile up with a hearty “After you”” (Nathan, 2013: 23–24).

In short, according to Nathan, there are forces for change and the pressure is building up to an extent that China has reached the tipping point. However, there is no telling when and how change will come. As Carothers has reminded us, change may never come. Carothers maintains that most transitional countries in fact enter a gray zone where they are neither clearly dictatorial nor clearly headed towards democracy. They get stuck in the transition process, so to speak (Carothers, 2002).
Fragmented Authoritarianism

In understanding the political processes in China and the outcomes these may have for the political system the concept of fragmented authoritarianism is useful.

The model of fragmented authoritarianism posits that authority below the very peak of the Chinese political system is fragmented. At the peak, power and authority are in the hands of very few people. They preside over a huge bureaucracy subdivided into various systems (xitong, 系统) according to functional divisions of authority. Through several rounds of administrative reform the government has tried to rationalize across these divisions the assignment of functions related to ownership, policy and regulations, but so far with limited success. Another source of fragmentation is the country’s multi-layered government system. Local governments seek to maximize their own budget and bureaucratic independence vis-à-vis the central government. The social groups mentioned by Nathan above are also potential sources of fragmentation. In the economic field the business groups also represent forces of fragmentation. They have developed considerable autonomy and those who are listed abroad operate according to globally defined market conditions (Brödsgaard, 2012). Thus they also have a fragmenting impact on the centralized power system. Lieberthal and Oksenberg worked out the concept of fragmented authoritarianism in a landmark study of China’s energy policy decision making, including the structures and processes of China’s energy bureaucracies and their influence on energy policy outcome (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). In 2009 Andrew Mertha published an article in which he argued that the policy-making process in China was still captured by the fragmented authoritarianism framework, although the process had also become increasingly pluralized (Mertha, 2009). This was brought about by the entry of “policy entrepreneurs.” Due to the fragmentation of the political system these “policy entrepreneurs” were able to take advantage of “spaces” created by social and political change. Mertha believes that the point of entry into the political process is “through the agency slack that results from the inability of institutions to adapt sufficiently to rapid socio-economic change, the aggressive lobbying of pressure groups or the changed expectations of the citizenry” (Mertha, 2009: 996). He calls the new revised version ‘fragmented authoritarianism 2.0’. He also sees the possibility of independent actors, though not necessarily as radical reformers much less revolutionaries.

Mertha identifies three new types of policy entrepreneurs. The first are officials opposed to a given policy who often are able to voice their disagreement. A second category consists of journalists and editors who are emerging due to the expanding liberal media environment. The third group is composed of individuals within Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Mertha mentions that there are between 300,000 and one million NGOs in China today. By incorporating NGOs into the fragmented authoritarianism model he establishes an interesting link to the civil society approach.

Fragmented authoritarianism as defined by Lieberthal and Oksenberg, and Lampton explains the policy arena as being governed by incremental change via bureaucratic bargaining. Policies are often changed or reshaped in the implementation phase. There is bargaining at all levels and between all levels and therefore Lampton has dubbed the system “the bargaining treadmill” (Lampton, 1987).

Mertha’s policy entrepreneurs introduce a new dynamic element into the bargaining process. In fact these policy entrepreneurs may be active both in the formulation and implementation phase. They often link together to interpret ideas in new ways or to recruit potential supporters. In this way they introduce pluralism into the policy arena. By repackaging existing ideas in new ways or by articulating how an issue is described, policy entrepreneurs also gain influence through issue framing. Often this takes places on the internet based discussion fora. This is an example of unofficial framing as opposed to the official framing of issues on the part of official
propaganda agencies.

Fragmented authoritarianism has the theoretical power to analyze and explain factors and developments that produce change within the Party-state system. The concept can also explain changes in state-society relations within the overarching framework of the Party-state. But the concept does not capture the dynamics of autonomous social or political agents and organizations. This is a basic weakness. However, since the existence of this kind of civil society is largely absent in China and therefore not a focal point of analysis, this is a weakness the field can live with.

As mentioned above, a great number of fragmenting forces can be identified in the Chinese polity. Party-business relations are a good example of the forces at work. In recent years a number of huge business SOEs have emerged. They enjoy informal vice-ministerial status and many of their executives are full or alternate members of the Central Committee. On paper they enjoy huge profits which they do not hand over to the state, the nominal shareholder, but keep in the company. For the companies listed abroad they operate according to market conditions that are globally defined. Thus they represent forces and interests that have a fragmented impact on the centralized power system (Brødsgaard, 2012).

On the other hand these companies are economic entities in which the Chinese Party-state is the dominant, if not the only, shareholder. The CEOs, board chairmen, and party secretaries of the 53 largest of these companies are in fact appointed and managed by the Party’s central organization department (COD). They are as such part of the central nomenklatura and can be moved around at the discretion of the COD. The rest of the 115 national champions are managed by the State Asset Management and Supervisory Committee (SASAC). In a recent article, I have coined the concept of integrated fragmentation to cover this combination of fragmentation and unified rule.

Nathan would probably still prefer to use the resilient authoritarianism concept, stressing the resilient rather than fragmented nature of this system. However, this would not indicate the potential for change inherent in fragmentation. He also does not answer the questions of resilient for whom and for how long?

The literature on the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Party-state has proposed various forms of authoritarian rule. A quick survey tells us that authoritarianism has become more “consultative” (He and Thøgersen, 2010), more “deliberative” (He and Warren, 2011), more “adaptive” (Heilmann and Perry, 2011). One study claims that society can be seen as accepting authoritarianism (Wright, 2010). Liz Perry even puts forward the concept of revolutionary authoritarianism, which at first glance seems to constitute a contradiction in terms (Perry, 2013). Whatever the modifications, the dominant current view is still that China is an authoritarian system. Whether it has become more deliberative or more consultative very much depends on the policy arena being studied. However, none of these modifications refute the claim that the system is also fragmented and that the contradiction between fragmentation and authoritarianism provides the dynamics for change.

Conclusion

The models discussed above do not offer a full list of possible ways to study China. One could, for example, argue that the political culture model should have its own section and not just be discussed under factionalism. Another approach which recently has gained prominence is the environmental approach.

The above survey of Western scholarship on contemporary Chinese politics and history show that there is a constant search for new and better concepts and theoretical approaches in order to understand the political processes and the political system in China. The survey also shows that
there is a link between paradigmatic shifts in methodologies and theories, and major political change in China. Thus the end of the Cultural Revolution, the arrest of the Gang of Four and Deng Xiaoping’s return to power “buried” the two-line model; the Tiananmen Massacre caused scholars to look for centrifugal tendencies and regime breakdown; China’s economic and political rise and peaceful transition to the post-Deng era gave rise to approaches such as resilient authoritarianism, which stress durability and resilience of an authoritarian system with an organizationally revitalized Party at the helm. Currently, influenced by huge corruption cases and a de facto halt to political reform and a downsizing of economic expectations, a tone of pessimism and skepticism has entered the field. David Shambaugh argues that the Party has lost its ability to adapt and Cheng Li writes that resilience will soon be followed by democratic change. This author recognizes the forces for fragmentation and change. However, the Party has not lost its legitimacy and ability to rule and is still able to rule the country through a better educated and younger bureaucracy. Through the \textit{nomenklatura} system the Party makes sure that all leadership positions are controlled by the Party. But widespread corruption and the buying of positions is a major threat to such a system and will cause loss of legitimacy and ultimately power, if not addressed.

In sum, currently there seems to be agreement that the polity is fragmented, and that it is authoritarian, but there is no agreement on the relative weight to be allocated to these two main characteristics. Inspired by Lieberthal and Oksenberg, Mertha maintains that fragmented authoritarianism is still a useful heuristic through which to study Chinese politics. However, he argues that the concept needs to be updated and adjusted in order to take the role of policy entrepreneurs into consideration. The policy entrepreneurs take advantage of the space created by China’s development process and actually represent forces of civil society. However, this is not in the Havelian sense but exists more as a sphere of non-governmental activity that is tolerated, if not promoted, by the state. Nathan’s concept of resilient authoritarianism emphasizes that the system not only is authoritarian, but that it seems sustainable and endurable—it is not going to go away. However, the Party and state are challenged by protest and opposition on the part of the poor and disadvantaged, representing political society. It is this struggle, combined with widespread corruption within Party and state, which has caused China to reach “the tipping point.”

\textbf{Notes}


3) This and the following discussion on the demise of the two-line class struggle model draws on Brodsgaard (1986).

4) For an elaboration of this argument see in particular Domes (1980).

5) Downs (2008), Jacobsen (2013). Li (2012) attempts a classification of interest groups distinguishing between three major interest groups: corporate or industrial interest groups (“black collar” stratum), the emerging middle class (“white collar” stratum) and vulnerable social groups such as migrants (“blue collar” workers). He claims that never in the history of the PRC have interest groups been as powerful and influential as they have been in recent years.

6) Philip Schmitter’s article on corporatism from 1974 still remains the \textit{locus classicus} for the definition of corporatism: “Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories recognized and licensed (if not created) by the state and granted deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and support.” See Schmitter (1974).

7) Western studies applying the concept of civil society to China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre include Strand (1990), Kelley and He (1992), Rowe (1990).

8) The civil society concept can be positioned in as many as six different Western discourses: (1) the traditional; (2)
the classical-liberal; (3) the Hegelian; (4) the Marxian; (5) the Gramscian; (6) and a newer, Havelian, which transcends Marx and Gramsci and takes its inspiration from the East European and Soviet transition to post-Communism. See Brødsgaard (1998).

9) For a summary of the model see Lieberthal (1992).
10) For a summary of the model of fragmented authoritarianism, see Lieberthal (1992).

References

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