

## Preface and Acknowledgments

One of the great mysteries of contemporary China is how the one-party state has held together through decades of dramatic social and economic change. When I first began to study Chinese politics in the early 1990s it was widely predicted that the Chinese one-party state would be the next domino to fall after Eastern Europe. Specialists on China's domestic politics generally agreed that the Communist Party-state was in atrophy as a result of declining legitimacy, widespread bureaucratic indiscipline, and moral decay. During the 1990s the Chinese Communist Party proved its doomsayers wrong by presiding over another decade of reform and dynamic economic growth. However, the very success of China's reforms and economic advancement became new grounds for Western specialists to predict the coming collapse of the party-state. Many argued that rapid economic growth and the rise of an increasingly well-educated middle class and more assertive civil society would create irresistible pressures for political liberalization. Indeed, much of the literature on Chinese politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s was preoccupied with identifying the seeds of Chinese democracy and the future shape of a more liberal Chinese state.

Today the Chinese party-state appears increasingly resilient, even in the face of rising economic inequalities, increasing social conflict, and widespread official corruption. Its resilience is the inspiration for this book. As a graduate student in the early 2000s I wanted to understand the institutions and mechanisms that enabled the Chinese party-state to defy predictions of its demise. While the literature on Chinese politics and institutions was growing and new data were becoming available, few scholars had been able to look inside the notoriously secretive Chinese state. I wanted to get inside the "black box" to examine the internal logic of Chinese officialdom. I decided the best way to approach my subject was to conduct an ethnography of the party-state at the local level, where I could gain access. I began

my investigation in a county in southwest China where a local NGO facilitated my participation in a series of environmental and rural development projects. During my first two years in the field I worked as a volunteer and consultant for Chinese and international NGOs, which gave me the opportunity to observe local political processes. I worked on a number of projects in collaboration with officials from various agencies and from various levels from township through to provincial government. I attended government meetings, accompanied officials on site visits, and socialized with officials after hours. Many of the people I worked with became friends. Through my relationships with them and through my observations of everyday politics I learned the unwritten rules of Chinese officialdom. By observing up close political phenomena that are normally only studied from a distance, I have been privileged with the opportunity to shine a light on corners of Chinese politics that are normally obscured from view. This book provides a microcosmic account of how the Chinese party-state operates in the absence of ideology and rule of law.

This book is the product of more than ten years of research. Along the way I have been the beneficiary of guidance and encouragement from many people. Jon Unger was instrumental in helping me to frame my original study and continued to be a most generous mentor as the project evolved. My wife Lee-Anne Henfry has been an extraordinary source of inspiration, ideas, and editorial support. I'm also grateful for the sage advice received from Tom Bernstein, Ben Kerkvliet, Andrew Kipnis, Kevin O'Brien, Jean Oi, Anthony Saich, and Mark Selden. Many other colleagues have given me much encouragement throughout the project. They include Geremie Barmé, Anita Chan, Graeme Smith, Luigi Tomba, and Peter Van Ness. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the team at Stanford University Press for their extremely helpful suggestions. Last, but not least, I want to thank all the people in China who allowed me to share their stories. To protect them, all names of people and places in this book have been disguised.