Democracy Paradox Podcast
Minxin Pei Warns China Has Descended into Totalitarianism (3/4/26)
Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Minxin Pei. He's the editor of the China Leadership Monitor and the author of numerous books including his latest, *The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism.* He's also the Tom and Margot Pritzker '72 Professor of Government and a George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College. Those who study democracy and dictatorship closely turn to Minxin Pei to understand politics in China. Longtime listeners of the podcast will him as a guest a few years ago.

I reached out to Minxin Pei, because I wanted to do more than discuss China and its politics. I've approached China from a few different directions over the past few years, so I want to do more than introduce listeners to its politics. For me China represents an ongoing case study of authoritarian governance and one that is stubbornly resistant to democracy.

What got my attention in Minxin Pei's new book is he argues China has evolved beyond authoritarianism into totalitarianism. This is a controversial statement for a number of reasons. For starters, the term totalitarianism is widely misunderstood. It doesn't help that scholars can't agree on the difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Some believe totalitarianism is an extreme form of authoritarianism, while others believe there are substantive differences between them.

In a past episode, I spoke with Kurt Weyland about the differences between authoritarianism and totalitarianism using historical examples. Minxin Pei has a similar understanding of the differences, although it's not quite as precise as Kurt's was. Nonetheless, it's remarkable to hear him argue China is now closer to totalitarianism than authoritarianism.

But we also contrast China's descent into totalitarianism with a brief window during the 1980s where genuine political reform and even democratization appeared possible. This is an era of China's history that most of us either misunderstand or simply don't know anything about. Beyond Deng Xiaoping, Minxin Pei introduces us to Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Chen Yun. For those interested in learning about China, it introduces a historical period that deserves your attention.

My challenge for you is to reflect on what China's political experience means for democracy and democratization. Let me know whether you think Minxin Pei is right in his assessment of China as totalitarian or if your think he goes too far. If you're listening on Spotify, you can leave your thoughts with a comment on the episode. You can also send me an email with thoughts or questions to jkempf@democracyparadox.com. There is also a link to a complete transcript in the shown notes.

The Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's

conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check the link in the show notes to register today. But for now… here is my conversation with Minxin Pei …

Interview

Justin Kempf: Minxin Pei, welcome back to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Minxin Pei: It's a pleasure to be back.

Justin Kempf: Well, Minxin, I was very impressed with your new book. It's called *The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism*. It gave a fascinating historical background, but one that helped us understand China as it is today and one of the key moments in the book is how you talk about the transition from the transition phase that China was in in the 1980s and how it changed as it went into the 1990s. But the question on my mind is, how close did China actually get to tying political liberalization with the economic liberalization that took place in the 1980s?

Minxin Pei: It was quite close. If I have to pinpoint the year, it's 1987 because this is the year which began with the purge of Hu Yaobang, who at the time was the party chief and a very liberal leader, but it ended with the 13th Party Congress, which installed Zhao Ziyang as the party chief in 1987. Deng Xiaoping approved this blueprint which would allow Zhao Ziyang to carry out a series of reforms, but the party central committee did not approve it. So had this party central committee approved it, then Zhao Ziyang would have more authority to essentially do something that would make China less totalitarian and more authoritarian.

Unfortunately, that did not happen, and then eighteen months later, after October 1987, Tiananmen happened. So, I think it was one real moment, even though I think in retrospect the probability was less than 50%, but that was a window.

Justin Kempf: I feel like there's a real change in how we think about China within recent years. I mean, Chinese specialists have always had a good sense of Chinese history, but I think for those of us who casually observe what's happening in China, most of us think about the 1980s as a period where Deng Xiaoping was calling all of the shots and that everybody else was irrelevant. We think of him as having the authority of a second Mao, but the more I learn about Chinese history, particularly in the 1980s, is that it was a lot more fluid.

There were a lot more leaders who were involved and part of that was because Deng Xiaoping didn't have a formal position within the Chinese hierarchy or at least, he was never the CCP chairman. He was never a president of China. So you had these different people who were involved at different times that had a lot more power that were open to political liberalization. I mean, it's something that I don't think that we fully appreciated until maybe the last few years when we've seen a couple books come out about this moment in the 1980s that flirted with the idea of not just economic liberalization, but even political liberalization.

Minxin Pei: Let's just get back to elite politics in the 1980s because I think people do not appreciate the ideological division and factional fighting within the Communist Party. Deng was very powerful, but he had a very formidable opponent on the side of the conservatives. His

name was Chen Yun. Chen Yun was a year younger than Deng Xiaoping, but was in poor health and was more senior than Deng Xiaoping through most of… I think even up to the Cultural Revolution. Chen Yun outranked Deng Xiaoping, except I think Deng gained a lot more prestige and mass appeal during the Cultural Revolution when Mao, who was in poor health had to bring Deng Xiaoping, who was disgraced at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, back to power, so was then in charge of China for roughly two years, 74-75.

Deng did a lot of good, so Deng gained a lot of popular appeal, but also authority within the Communist Party. But when the Cultural Revolution was over, Chen Yun returned to power as well. So, Deng had to negotiate authority with Chen Yun. Chen Yun was firmly opposed to economic liberalization. Chen Yun wanted to bring China back to the 1950s to totalitarianism, but not crazy totalitarianism like the Cultural Revolution. Deng wanted to bring China into the capitalist era, but still under one party rule. So, they shared the same political vision of one party rule forever, but they conflicted with each other over the economic policy to make that happen.

Eventually Deng Xiaoping would triumph after the fall of the Soviet Union, but in the 1980s you had this back and forth struggle between the two groups, so Deng was never firmly in control. Deng was really powerful, but he actually had very powerful opponents to deal with as well.

Justin Kempf: But those who had the formal levers of power were people who were a little bit more open to reform?

Minxin Pei: Oh, yes, yes. Yeah.

Justin Kempf: I mean, Zhao Ziyang is another one that I hear his name come up frequently. It's interesting you say 1987 is when things changed because he was forced out of power after Tiananmen Square in 1989, which was a very dramatic showing on his part. That is the moment where other people, especially people who are more casual observers like myself sit there and think this is the moment that China changed. But you're seeing it was even earlier than that. But still, there's a lot of things going on in China all the way through that entire decade.

Minxin Pei: The 1980s is interesting but also confusing because there was a lot of back and forth. It started with two liberals firmly in charge of the party's day-to-day affairs. They cannot set policy, but they can influence policy and then execute policy. One was in charge of the party. The other was in charge of the economy as the premier. So, Hu Yaobang protected a lot of intellectuals. He encouraged ideological debate. He encouraged the rule of law and he also encouraged a much more tolerant policy toward ethnic minorities.

Justin Kempf: And that's huge because maybe a decade or maybe 15 years before that we're dealing in the height of the Cultural Revolution and now we're going the complete opposite way in terms of the pendulum.

Minxin Pei: Oh, of course. I think now today we are back to the 1950s. That is you have nearly one man in charge, ideological rigidity, quite hostile relationship with the west, and the reassertion of state control, which is still in progress. The 1980s provided this very narrow window of opportunity. Of course, 1989 changed everything.

Justin Kempf: It changed everything in terms of political liberalization, but it did not change everything in terms of economic liberalization. However, some people thought that it could, because after Tiananmen, there was a movement to move backwards economically. And if I remember right, it is Deng Xiaoping's famous Southern Tour in 1992 - so this is three years after Tiananmen - where he's able to completely shift the ship and coopt Jiang Zemin, who stays on message after Deng steers the ship. Then you have China shifting back again, at least towards maintaining the level of economic liberalization, if not continuing to further some forms of liberalization.

Minxin Pei: Yes, it's the one-two punch I call it. The 1989 crackdown, which brought the party to the brink of collapse because there was a nationwide uprising and then the fall of the Soviet Union. So, the party suffered two crises, one internal, one external in quick succession. We're talking about two and a half years. After the fall of the Soviet Union Deng Xiaoping at the time was 88. He said, I've got to do something. By that time, the conservatives were totally clueless, thoroughly demoralized by the fall of the Soviet Union, because after Tiananmen, they tried without success to bring back the planned economy. They wanted to shut the door on capitalism once and all, but they were not successful.

Then the Soviet Union failed. The model for the conservatives was kaput. So, it's no coincidence that three weeks after the fall of the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping went on this Southern Tour. By that time, the party rallied around one vision. In the 1980s, the party was divided, but after 1991, the party said that's it. Only capitalism can save the Communist Party. This is so ironic because Deng found the way and all others were in declining health anyway, so they said, okay, now you are CEO and chairman and everything. Get the party back on track. So they adopted radical economic reforms to embrace capitalism.

Let me just give you one figure. Throughout the 1980s, China had $10 billion in foreign direct investment, in the 1990s every year it would get something like $50 billion. So you can see the immense shift toward globalization and pro-market economic policies.

Justin Kempf: Now, let me just clarify though. I mean, you said that Deng Xiaoping was CEO and Chairman and all of that. But he doesn't formally take a title, if I remember right. He does have a title. I mean, he's President of the Bridge Club.

Minxin Pei: Honorary Chairman, Honorary Chairman, not just president. Okay. Because when he died, his only title was the Honorary Chairman of the Chinese Bridge Players Association.

Justin Kempf: So Deng Xiaoping is governing, but it's an informal kind of governance and it's very reminiscent of what Mao did at the time. Because he held on as formally chairman but took a step back in terms of governance during periods and then would just assert his authority implicitly Deng did even less. I mean, he wasn't even chairman of the Communist Party. It's very different than what we see today with Xi Jinping, who's not just chairman of the Communist Party, but also president of China and head of the military. He has all three levers of power, not just implicitly, but also explicitly. It's a very different way of approaching power that relies on institutions, but at the same time is a different, more centralized approach to power all at the same time.

Minxin Pei: I want to add, aside from his three titles, Xi Jinping is chairman of something like 10-15 small groups, so we're talking about somebody who probably needs 48 hours a day. Now

let me just look at two things. One is really sense of security and authority, both formal and informal. The differences between Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping. The other is management style, leadership style. They're related. Deng Xiaoping without question did not have any problem that people would know he's in charge. The guy had a record of proven leadership: military, political. During the Cultural Revolution took China out of the darkness of the Maoist period. The man did not have to wear titles.

Justin Kempf: That's good and bad. On the one hand, he doesn't need to assert authority. He can bring other people in to do things. But at the same time, as Tom Ginsburg has pointed out in a paper, a co-authored paper, Xi Jinping in an odd way, is an institutionalist by saying, I'm going to hold on to power and in its own way can reinforce an idea of the rule of law in a bizarrely, almost perverted way with the way that he actually is exercising power.

Minxin Pei: Well, when we think about political systems, people in the west are really influenced by so-called rule-based system institutions, but dictatorships don't work that way. Dictatorship's power is not specified according to rules. Power is how do you get it, how you wield it. And if you look at how Xi Jinping governs today, it's not strictly according to rules. He can violate the rules whenever he sees it as advantageous to him. So, I think what you pointed out is something that's a fundamental flaw to dictatorship, for all dictatorships, that is the impossibility of having rules, obeying the rules and enforcing the rules. We can touch on this later on.

So, once Xi Jinping does not wear these titles, will he actually have power? It's untested. He does not have much of a record unlike Deng Xiaoping. There are lots of good stories about Deng Xiaoping. So today, if you say, what has Xi Jinping done for China lately? A lot of slogans, a lot of problems. You can, of course, point to some success stories. For me it's actually hard. So, this comes down to the different nature of power, which actually has real political consequences for a sense of security. Deng Xiaoping was very secure. He did not engage in massive purges. If you engage in massive purges, you have real struggles because you see enemies everywhere. Xi Jinping has not stopped since day one. So that is a difference in authority. The other is management style. Deng Xiaoping was a delegator. Xi Jinping is a micromanager.

Deng Xiaoping's philosophy was that I set a policy, but I trust the capable people to implement them for me. I find capable people and say, you have my full confidence. Go out and do stuff. His office was his living room. He did not go to the Communist Party headquarters. He would call people in there. He would give them very brief instructions, very broad delegations. So, Deng actually was a very good leader. He knew the broad objectives. He did not know specifics, but he would hire people who knew the specifics. That's why the guy lived to be 93. He had time to play bridge.

Now Xi Jinping has to worry about everything. So, when this company, Alibaba's FinTech company called Ant Group, was about to be listed, Xi personally said, this group cannot be listed. So, this is a man who would bother with the listing of a private company. This is where you have two very different leaders in terms of the sense of power, security, and their management style. I think on balance you will have to say Deng Xiaoping was a much more successful leader than Xi Jinping.

Justin Kempf: So are you saying that the difference between the authoritarianism under Deng and what you describe as the totalitarianism under Xi Jinping comes down to management styles

or do you think of authoritarianism and totalitarianism - a word we don't even use very much anymore, that's almost just disappeared from our lexicon - is the difference between these two, even larger than that?

Minxin Pei: Oh, much, much, much more. We don't talk about totalitarianism much anymore, at least until now. That's because it disappeared. Well, North Korea is still totalitarian. It's about 21-22 million people with nukes. It's not going to do a lot of damage to the world as long as it stays within its borders. But for a major totalitarian regime, the last one was Mao's China, died in 1976, Stalin 53, Hitler 45. I think in world history we had three really consequential, large totalitarian regimes, but the last one was 50 years ago, so that's why we're not talking about totalitarianism anymore. The term, by the way, is often used loosely, too loosely by journalists, because they don't know the key differences, the systemic differences, between totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

I get really upset when totalitarianism is equated with sheer brutality. So, a really brutal regime, like Sadam's regime, that's totalitarian. It's not totalitarian. It's a really brutal dictatorship because for totalitarianism you have to tick these boxes. There is a Leninist party state. That is you have one party which controls the state, which thoroughly controls the army, thoroughly controls all security forces. Then it has a totalitarian ideology, which is either Nazism or Communism, which points to some kind of future nirvana and portrays the ideology as scientific and guides policy. Then you also have to have systematic use of terror as a means of rule. Then you have a totalitarian leader which is supported by a personality cult. Then you also have a controlled economy and total controlled information.

Of course, China does not tick off all the boxes today, but it can tick at least four or five boxes. So that's why China today is much more totalitarian than authoritarian. Most dictatorships in the world are authoritarian, not totalitarian.

Justin Kempf: It's interesting though, because there wasn't a single moment that the regime collapsed. It just kind of evolved out of something that was totalitarian under Mao into something that was more authoritarian and it's difficult to even pinpoint when that moment is because even with the death of Mao you transition into what was called the Gang of Four. I mean, you could argue that that was totalitarian, but you could also say that it was authoritarian because maybe they didn't have enough control over the regime itself.

Then you transition back to… at least you're arguing that they transition back to totalitarian under Xi Jinping and there's no defining moment where we can say the boxes are ticked, this is exactly the moment, because it's a gradual transformation. Is it really just that subtle? Is it just a mindset change or is it something that we can actually see with a clear defining marker where we move from one regime type to another?

Minxin Pei: So what happens after Stalin died? What happened after Mao died? I think scholars have great difficulty identifying or labling the regime of the two territories. For a long time, Soviet specialists and China specialists would call these regimes, after the death of the totalitarian leader, as post-totalitarian. So, they cannot call these regimes authoritarian because they don't tick those boxes, because the parties are there and the control of the economy was there. What disappeared was the ideology was much weaker. There was no totalitarian leader and the use of mass terror stopped. I have a much better description. I think what we mean by post-totalitarian

is really the preservation of the institutions because all the institutions are there, but there was a suspension of practices. So they did not use these institutions the same way they used to.

Now from that point, it's actually pretty easy to understand how Xi Jinping revived totalitarianism. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment because it's gradual. I would say that to throw this gigantic ship away from this authoritarian path, because China was on the path to some form of authoritarianism, back to totalitarianism, you need to do a lot of things. What Xi did was first purge using an anti-corruption campaign to wipe out his rivals and then he clamped down on Chinese society with the war against social media. So that's the second step.

And then the third step was to acquire personal power. He made himself - I think it's 2016 - the core leader of the Communist Party. Then he launched the crackdown in Xinjiang, the mass incarceration crackdown in Hong Kong, and then a crackdown on the private sector 2021. So, it is a gradual process, but he had this system ready for him to use, as I said, because the system was there and had always been there intact.

Justin Kempf: At the same time, it's almost never a gradual process when a totalitarian regime comes into power for the first time. We see the Nazi regime change dramatically in just a short period of time. I mean, I don't want to say it was immediately, but it wasn't a very long period after Hitler takes power.

Minxin Pei: It's a one year.

Justin Kempf: Yeah. We see Mao pretty much install his regime.

Minxin Pei: Three years.

Justin Kempf: It's becoming totalitarian just by its nature. Even the Soviet Union under Lenin becomes totalitarian within a very short period of time. Obviously, the early years of the Soviet Union were a lot more brittle and delicate, but still it wasn't something that we would think of as authoritarian after just a couple years of coming into power it was something much darker and even more sinister than that.

Minxin Pei: Oh, absolutely. I think you have to look at history. In this case, you must account for the effect of the revolution. In the Soviet Union, in China, once you rely on a revolution, then you wipe out the enemies physically. Mao killed billions of people. I don't know how many Stalin killed, but a lot. The Nazis operated in a very different context, but you really need a massive political shock. In China, 10 years ago, 12 years ago, when Xi came to power, it was supposed to be a very smooth succession. He did not have the tailwind of a revolution to do dramatic things.

Justin Kempf: So, when we think of totalitarianism, we think of the regimes that are extremely powerful. We think of the absolute extreme end of sinister, dark powers. I mean, we think of China under Mao. We think of Russia under Stalin. We think of Nazi Germany under Hitler, but the person who actually originated the term was Benito Mussolini in Italy and yet fascist Italy as terrible as it was feels like it's a step back from these other powerful regimes that we usually think of as totalitarian. How does that change how we think about totalitarianism? Should we even classify Italy as totalitarian or does it actually change the way that we think about it in terms

of not being as brutal and all expansive, but being something that's more subtle or something that's slightly different?

Minxin Pei: Yeah, I think it all comes down to organization. You cannot be a genuine totalitarian, even if you call yourself totalitarian unless you have a powerful party. You have to have a centralized hierarchical party with tentacles throughout society. The Communist party certainly qualifies: Soviet Communist Party, Chinese Communist Party certainly qualified. I think the Nazis would qualify as well. I don't think that Mussolini had that kind of organizational infrastructure to support his policies, to implement his policies. So it's more like quasi-totalitarian, semi-totalitarian, but certainly I think Mao, Stalin, and Hitler would dismiss him as a wannabe totalitarian rather than a genuine totalitarian.

Justin Kempf: Now the Communist Party in China doesn't lose power after Mao dies. I mean, it's there. It's strong and this is why Xi Jinping has the infrastructure in place.

Minxin Pei: Yes, absolutely.

Justin Kempf: But as you described, many people saw a difference between China in the late seventies and eighties and nineties as opposed to the period under Mao dating from 1949 until his death in 1976.

Minxin Pei: Yes.

Justin Kempf: Juan Linz is the person who talked about…

Minxin Pei: Yes.

Justin Kempf: …who talked about post-totalitarianism. He's the one that talked about that and for him, it was the idea that totalitarianism had exhausted itself in a place like the Soviet Union or China. It had come to a sense of exhaustion and run out of steam. So, you've got the institutions, but things are just running slow.

Minxin Pei: Yes.

Justin Kempf: You're saying that it's not quite like that. That authoritarianism was different than a sense of totalitarian exhaustion. It was something unique. Something that wasn't quite post-totalitarian or are you just coopting the term and using it in a different way?

Minxin Pei: So, I struggled with the term totalitarian because I'm convinced Xi's project of reviving totalitarian will fail because it is exhausting. The key is it turns out to be a bankrupt ideology. Despite Xi's efforts to revive orthodox ideology, the Communist Party is completely secular. That's why you have so much corruption. But in the meantime, he has brought back the practices of totalitarian rule, the constant purges, personality cult, aggressive foreign policy, strict social control, and attempted, I say attempted, reinsertion of state control over the economy. So, we're talking about the revival of totalitarian practices that was previously thought to be impossible or completely irrational, but I think that Chinese society has changed. The party itself has changed. Xi is engaged in an ultimately doomed enterprise.

By the way, it serves him really well. The irony is that he thinks that he would save the Communist Party. He can't. His policies will accelerate the decline of the Communist Party, but in this process, he has served himself really well: open-ended rule, personality cult, a lot of power. That's, of course, China's tragedy, but that also reconfirms, Juan Linz's observation that totalitarianism is an exhausted intellectual ideological enterprise.

Justin Kempf: So, if we extend the idea of totalitarianism coming to a sense of exhaustion, you argue that reform started the engines again. It was the reform process itself that helped buttress and strengthen authoritarianism, which is an idea that I'm seeing more and more in literature as I continue to come across it. I think it's not necessarily a new idea, but something that's played with a lot more often. The idea that as authoritarianism becomes less authoritarian and becomes not necessarily democratic, but less centralized, that it actually becomes a little bit more durable and it strengthens itself so that it becomes harder to make those final leaps in terms of reform. Because it becomes calcified, it becomes stronger.

It becomes more resilient and yet because it's so strong, because China's more resilient in terms of its regime, it allows itself to backtrack and become totalitarian, which sounds like it's going to become, or it's already becoming more brittle, because of these efforts to centralize things once again. Is that how you think about it in terms of this direction where it's becoming more secure with reform, but the reform itself gives it the security to be able to become more totalitarian, which makes it more brittle once again,

Minxin Pei: More or less, but let me just divide this history into two parts. One is how did we get Xi Jinping, because this is actually a big question the book tries to address. Deng Xiaoping, his colleagues and the Communist Party, never wanted to see another Mao. So, the irony here is that they had enough of a totalitarian leader. The paradox of dictatorship - you focus on the democracy paradox, but there's also dictatorship paradox - is that dictatorships do well when they do not have a genuine dictator. When they have a genuine dictator, dictatorships suffer because the guy becomes unconstrained. He would go after everybody. Everybody was insecure.

So, when Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and others returned to power, they said no. Enough Mao, we would never have another Mao again. So, they began to put in guardrails. It turned out that they did not put in strong guardrails. Essentially, if you want to put in strong guardrails, you have to make the rules much more explicit and enforceable. Within the Communist Party, within dictatorship that's hard because dictatorships cannot enforce their own rules. So how do you address that flaw? You actually need to democratize. You need to establish independent third party enforcers: civil society, press, the legal system. Deng Xiaoping was dead set against these third party enforcers because they could dilute the Communist Party's power.

Now, the other part of the story is that we all believe that economic modernization would lead to political democratization. The modernization thesis, of course, was oversimplified. But when you look at what actually happened when countries democratize, it was always started by elites. When the elites decide to democratize, democratization happens. For many dictatorships, the smart ones, today, not just China - Vietnam is actually a very good case - they think if you think that becoming wealthy will lead to regime change, we have counter measures. So in post-Tiananmen China they effectively put in place a survival strategy which is now that we have more wealth, we are going to develop surveillance, so social groups that are produced by modernization will not dare to challenge us. Repression has increased. The capacity for repression has increased even though they don't actually kill a lot of people.

And second for elites, we want to coopt them. Because modernization produces elites, we want them to share the spoils, so we have fewer counter-elites. Communism has lost its ideological pull. What about nationalism? We are going to encourage nationalism and, of course, economic development will improve the standard of living, so they have performance legitimacy. They have a new toolbox to help them stay in power. That's why economic development, at least in the short to medium term, will not give you democracy.

Justin Kempf: So, the story that we're telling right now is that the reforms that were put in place… the political reforms that were put in place along with some of the economic reforms by expanding a more pluralistic society just by having more economic differences, having people own their own businesses and so forth. All of that together is creating these different elites, these different sources of power, these different people who had different stakes in the game, and creating new rules that did exist to constrain power. Those rules created a resilient authoritarianism that eventually led to something that allowed for a decay into totalitarianism.

It's a sociological argument right now, but what I find fascinating is oftentimes there's a political argument about how Xi Jinping came to power. Instead of thinking of Xi Jinping as something that's almost inevitable, that China would eventually decay into totalitarianism without further political reform, people look at the dynamics between Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and the fight over who's going to succeed Hu Jintao because Deng Xiaoping had picked Hu Jintao to succeed Jiang Zemin, so he had his fingerprints going all the way into the Chinese leadership until 2012 extending far past his death.

But because the dynamics were such that Hu Jintao was such a weak leader, or at least he was considered so among China, and Jiang Zemin had extended out his power and extended out his fingerprints within the Chinese state in terms of those who were loyal to him, Xi Jinping just became this dark horse candidate who came to power.

But what's fascinating is that everybody assumed he was going to be even weaker than Hu Jintao because he didn't have anybody who was his patron. He didn't have anybody who was indebted to him. He was completely alone coming to power in a situation where you had these two rival factions competing. The argument I've been told is because he was so alone in that situation, it encouraged him to crack down on elites to assert his authority. Does that political story play a role within this more sociological story that you're telling?

Minxin Pei: Again, a two part answer. First is that Xi's rise was accidental. That's why I say Xi is an accident waiting to happen. Until 1997, it was unclear that the guy was in the front row of successors. In 1997 the Communist Party Central Committee has two classes of members: full members and alternate members. An alternative member is elected by the delegation to the party Congress. So, in 1997 Xi Jinping was dead last on the list of alternative members, which probably suggests he didn't make it. They put his name there, but he was pretty lowly ranked. Then in 2002 for some unknown reason, he was put into the front rank. He became the party chief of Zhejiang. Then in 2006 there was this big factional fighting between Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and the Shanghai party chief was arrested. Then they looked at this guy.

So, for a long time he was thought to be unaffiliated, weak and so forth. I think what enabled him to crack down very hard was that around this period Xi was thinking about how to consolidate power. Xi's a very good student of totalitarian politics. He knew how the law of the jungle works. That is, you have to be ruthless. So, when Xi came to power in 2012, he hired a

henchman by the name of Wang Qishan. You can call him whatever name you want, but he was his right hand man. He was very smart, very ruthless and was in charge of his anti-corruption campaign. Why could he go after his rivals so easily? Because under one-party rule economic development would inevitably produce massive corruption.

So, most of the leaders and their families are dirty and that gave him a very easy path to consolidating power. It's really the political story, but also the factional fighting. By the time he assumed power, all other rival factions were becoming really weak. Jiang Zemin was in his eighties and physically unable to be very active. Hu Jintao said, I'm done. I do not want anything to do with power. He quit all his positions giving Xi for the first time… Xi was the first Chinese leader in post-Mao China who could assume three positions at the same time. So, Xi actually had an easy path to ultimate power.

Justin Kempf: But do you think Xi Jinping was inevitable?

Minxin Pei: No. It could be another person. But I think what bothers me is that if Xi Jinping did not prevail this other character who now sits in jail. His name is Bo Xilai.

Justin Kempf: But do you think, not Xi Jinping himself, do you think the idea of a leader like Xi Jinping was inevitable?

Minxin Pei: It's a highly likely outcome because to the extent that you want to gain power, are you going to gain power being a nice guy following the rules and project a liberal open vision within a Leninist Party? No way. You can only do this by dredging up the party's historical legitimacy as a revolutionary force by using brute force against your opponents. Unfortunately, this is what happens in bad systems. Bad money drives out good money.

I think if you look at historical contingencies such as had 1989 not happened, it'll be very, very different. We would not have Xi Jinping. There will be no Jiang Zemin, no Hu Jintao. It will be relatively liberal leaders all the way through. Now let's assume had Xi Jinping not been picked as a dark horse in 2007, Li Keqiang could be the leader. So that would be another Hu Jintao.

Justin Kempf: So, if we look at the future, does that mean that it's more likely to see another Xi Jinping, somebody who's just as ruthless as him or do you think that it's possible that we go the opposite direction with somebody more like a Hu Jintao that's considered to be a weak leader? I mean, there's a way to think of the situation in China that Hu Jintao is the outlier, because he came from a very non-traditional path, being involved more with the Chinese student association and was handpicked at such an early point that nobody really knew how tested he was. So, what direction do you think it's going to go? Do you think that it's going to be become increasingly ruthless or do you think that it's really unknown what the future of China might become?

Minxin Pei: I would say that Hu Jintao is not an outlier. He's a feature of the system. I think true outliers would be another Hu Yaobang or Zhao Ziyang, because these were liberals like Gorbachev. These people were not supposed to happen, were not supposed to exist in the system, but they existed and they made a difference. Hu Jintao was more like Brezhnev. It's that kind of leader the system had to produce but Mao, Xi Jinping, Stalin these are the leaders totalitarian systems also produce: very powerful brutal domineering leaders like Xi Jinping and others or post-totalitarian systems will produce colorless, mediocre ones like Brezhnev and Hu Jintao.

So, looking at the future, I would say I agree with you it's unknown. Lots of things can happen, but I tend to bet on gigantic swings because this is what flawed systems do. They swing from one extreme to another. So, without Mao's extremist Cultural Revolution debacle, there would be no reform because you have to tell the system that the previous regime has so screwed up, we have to do anything, even the most inconceivable things to save it. So, I think the future after Xi really depends on how much he screws up China. Ironically, the worse the situation is the more likely that China could swing back to a much more open direction.

Justin Kempf: Now, at the end of your book. You do have a future oriented look where you're talking about more specifics than we've done so far where you're talking about things like China's debt crisis, the demographic decline - they have a lot of problems on their plate - their economy. Even with higher growth rates within the United States, it doesn't feel that those growth rates are stable based on how they've been able to generate them within recent years. Now they're leaning into even more export led growth, which, again, doesn't feel stable in the long term. How do you think these different forces are going to collide? Do you feel that China's on a route towards inevitable decline in terms of its power or do you feel that China has the resources that it needs to be an incredibly powerful country for decades to come?

Minxin Pei: Again, two points. I think the decline has already begun. Post-COVID 2023 - this is year number four - and economy is still stuck. Of course, there are debates among China watchers. The more optimistic people will say they're doing really well in the technology space with AI and EVs. That is true, but as I said these sectors are not going to bring the economy back to broad-based growth. Second is that I would say China has the resources to sustain its economy. It has a very dynamic, big private sector, a lot of smart people, a very hardworking population, and despite decoupling with the US is still closely connected with the global economy and is an enormous manufacturing competitor. So, a long list, but you must have the correct government policy.

It's difficult to conceive of sustaining long-term growth if China keeps fighting a cold war with the US. If China invests a lot in the military, if China's technological ties and trade ties with the west continue to disengage, Xi Jinping's trust in the private sector continues to decline… In other words, I see enormous potential, but I see political obstacles. If Xi Jinping stays in power, it's very unlikely he's going to be changing policy because changing policy would be an effective repudiation of his record, of his authority, of his leadership, and that goes against his own political interest.

So, we are stuck with a country that has enormous potential, enormous capabilities to do really well for its people, but we're stuck with a leadership that is exhausted. Xi Jinping does not have any ideas about bringing China back from its current difficulties. He came into office with a lot of ideas, but now he's intellectually exhausted.

Justin Kempf: Let me ask you one final question. You study China. It's an authoritarian country. It is not a country that we would think of when we think of democracy and yet I find that by studying countries like China and other authoritarian countries, oftentimes I learn a lot about democracy. So, let me ask you, what has the study of China, both in terms of its history as well as its current state of affairs, actually taught you about democracy?

Minxin Pei: The rise of democracy has a lot of historical contingencies. History matters a lot. So, in other words, given China's history, democracy is going to be a really long, difficult struggle

compared with other countries. Second, I think democracy in the abstract, so when I look at democracies elsewhere, democracy cannot produce a lot of good things that we depend on. But democracy has one really good feature. That is if you genuinely have competitive politics, you can throw the bums out. That is you can get rid of bad leaders. That's advantage number one.

Advantage number two is that it does specify certain rules much better than dictatorship because, more or less, democracy comes with civil liberties, the rule of law… We're talking about liberal democracy. If you have that, then I think as individuals, you would prefer to live in a democracy than in a place where you don't have control over your personal life. I think these two things allow me to vote for democracy anytime.

Justin Kempf: Well, Minxin Pei, thank you so much for joining me today. To mention your book one more time, it's called *The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism*. It's definitely a worthwhile read for anyone who wants to better understand China, but also to understand the ideas behind authoritarianism, because, as we said, understanding authoritarianism can oftentimes help us understand democracy better. So, thank you so much for writing the book. Thank you so much for coming on to talk to us today.

Minxin Pei: Thank you.