

Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Information, Ideology, and Authoritarianism in China. By Jeremy L. Wallace. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 288p. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

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In 2013, a year after Xi Jinping took office, he issued a stern warning about the role that the country's gross domestic product should play in its politics. During an investigation tour of Hunan Province, Xi conceded that while China must fix its sights firmly on the task of economic construction, officials must not reduce "development" to a simple matter of merely increasing GDP and blindly rank some as political "heroes" based solely on GDP growth. Officials at all levels must instead pursue what he referred to as "real GDP," as measured in terms of "efficient, high-quality, and sustainable economic development."

Xi's turn away from the "limited, quantified vision" (3) of his immediate predecessors is Wallace's point of departure for this intriguing new monograph: "How did a revolutionary Communist Party come to justify itself through a limited number of statistics," Wallace asks, "and why is it currently shifting away from doing so?" (3). In the wake of Mao's death, "revolutionary ideology was supplanted by quantified state capitalism as the regime's main argument for staying in power" (15). Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's canny deployment of Mao's 1938 invocation to "seek truth from facts," Wallace traces the complex process by which the early post-Mao leadership championed the "fact-based empiricism of 'practice'" (52) as a guide for action, and, ultimately, policy-making. In returning cadres purged during Mao's Cultural Revolution to power, Deng succeeded in populating the regime with technocrats who agreed on the goal of economic development, although perhaps differing on the means to attain it. This cohort of successors propounded the idea that China's political and economic dilemmas were reducible to straightforward technical issues that could be quantified and therefore solved, ushering in a new era—and a new ideology—of "limited, quantified governance" (53) in which superordinate authorities focused mainly a small number of statistics at the aggregate level and paid close attention a few critical outputs to assess the performance of localities (128).

Wallace notes at least the initial functionality of this system, which took China's GDP from 364 billion RMB in 1978, at the start of the reform era, to a whopping 30.3 trillion in 2008. The Chinese economy grew sixteen-fold, helping to ensure the regime's durability and survival into the future. At the heart of the system, Wallace argues, is the cadre evaluation system, which in 1998 involved a weighted series of eighteen indicators for local officials that included "soft targets, hard targets, and priority targets with veto power" that were evaluated on an annual basis (112). Over time, the number of performance indicators proliferated. Although some later additions were admittedly more abstract and less easily quantified, economic and revenue growth targets remained of paramount importance (113); these measures generated moral hazard problems, and "gaming the system" problems ("hiding facts") from whose performance was being assessed (128). Unsurprisingly, over time, significant externalities emerged that, rendered it "unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable," as Premier Wen Jiabao lamented in 2007 (107). Attempts to expand the indicators upon which the system of cadre evaluation relied to correct such trends—for example, by creating a "green GDP" measure capable of discounting some of the more egregious excesses in the existing system—ended in failure (124).

By the end of the Hu-Wen era in 2012, Wallace finds that the externalities generated by "limited, quantitative vision" simply overwhelmed the system. "[S]uffocating pollution, pervasive corruption, stark inequality, rising debt, persistent poverty, inefficient investment, deliberate falsification, and slowing growth" resulted; "[what] mattered was not counted, and what was counted did not measure up" (164). Wallace writes off the

“uncertainty and narrative swings” that characterized Xi’s first year in power as a prime example of “a Bayesian learning model of new authoritarian leadership with weak priors and a vast, multidimensional political space” (179). But he finds that “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” quickly coalesced around a coherent diagnosis of the failures of the preceding leadership teams, as well as a tripartite cure: a thoroughgoing and far-ranging anti-corruption campaign designed to weed out mis- and malfeasance and instill new norms of behavior; a centralization of political decision-making to correct the centripetal pathologies that were undermining the functioning of the Party-state system; and a reinvigoration of the role of the Party. These comprise Xi’s “neopolitical turn,” which has also been accompanied by a potent embrace of both traditionalism and nationalism in the public sphere. Wallace argues that both the propaganda and justification strategy of the current regime project an understanding of the world as chaotic and conflict-ridden, replete with egregious failures and sinister enemies, in which only the strong and steady hand of Xi guiding the ship of state can afford safety and security. Nevertheless, the author warns that Xi’s governance model is likewise fraught with potential vulnerabilities. A chief example is the regime’s response to the COVID-19 crisis, and the resultant wave of public anti-lockdown “A4 protests” in November 2022, some of which called for Xi’s ouster. By eschewing the mask of technocratic jargon and justifications for policy shifts, Wallace warns that Xi has put politics front and center in public discourse, potentially opening up the regime’s justifications to challenging questions that raise issues of justice, fairness, and accountability. The institutional changes wrought by Xi’s seemingly relentless effort to centralize leave the center more exposed when decisions backfire. Another of the contemporary regime’s counterintuitive and worrying responses to the problems of “*limited*, quantitative vision has been to attempt to quantify everything” (5, emphasis original) by imposing a vastly ambitious social credit system.

Perhaps the most controversial claim undergirding Wallace’s analysis is his core contention that despite the fact that “[d]ictators desire data” (79), China’s post-Mao political center “*intentionally* limited its vision into localities” (62, emphasis added) as a conscious and deliberate strategy. The author repeatedly asserts that although “the regime’s center had the *capacity* to see more deeply or broadly when it chose to do so,” for the most part, the system of “limited, quantified vision represented a *choice*” deliberately exercised by the top leadership in Beijing (155, emphasis added). His claim that this wilful “blind-eye governance” strategy is what allowed for the “directed improvisation” of local officials to spur rapid economic growth while shielding the center from both exogenous charges that it was adopting overtly capitalistic policies, and endogenous opposition from the revolutionary socialist old guard within the Party ranks. It also, Wallace argues, permitted more entrepreneurial local officials to pursue higher-risk growth strategies, while allowing more cautious locales to adopt a wait and see approach (62).

This contention, if correct, challenges one of the ungirding assumptions of the “adaptive governance” paradigm that characterises the post-Mao policy-making process as one of continual and careful adjustment. One of the hallmarks of that approach views “maximum tinkering” as taking place under the “Leninist hierarchy” of the watchful Party center; the results of local experiments were not only closely monitored by Beijing, but fed through a “CCP learning system” which, although not immune to malfunction, was designed to disseminate positive models, and draw lessons from failures. Instead, Wallace’s is a rather different portrait of a reform-era Party-state that has governed quantitatively from a distance by choice, but has now embraced the “personalization, centralization, and Partyfication of power” under Xi Jinping.