For many, it is true by definition that the People’s Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party is an illegitimate regime. Whether because of the terrors of the Maoist era, the June 4 bloodshed, the more recent suppressions in Tibet and Xinjiang, or other systematic denials of human rights, it is, for these people, inconceivable that the CCP has any legitimacy at all. By universal standards of human rights and governance, the current regime is illegitimate. Moreover, its continuing existence despite its illegitimacy requires global citizens and states that claim to uphold universal standards to act to bring China into conformity with global norms.

This certainly is a valid point of view. But from the perspective of the current regime or the Chinese people, this external perspective has limited relevance. Legitimacy is largely (but not entirely) a domestic phenomenon. Most of its consequences accrue within national boundaries, and while links to external standards of legitimacy exist within China, and indeed, the CCP is in dialogue with those standards, in a hardly constructive way, the important aspects of legitimacy concern the staking out of claims to legitimacy by the regime and whether those claims are accepted by Chinese citizens.

The conventional wisdom among western journalists, political leaders and many academics is that the CCP makes claims to legitimacy through its attainment of superior performance (or performance based legitimacy) and through ideological or value based legitimacy, with (a type of) Chinese nationalism and national greatness as a second set of claims. It would be impossible to deny that nationalism and performance have certainly
been used by the CCP to argue for its “right” to rule. But in this brief paper, I want to ask whether these really are enough, and speculate on whether there are other things going on as well.

Let’s start by conceding that it is extraordinarily difficult to determine whether a system of governance of any sort is legitimate or not. In contemporary times, public opinion research and polls are often used to try to assess political legitimacy. Before the advent of sophisticated public opinion research, one might use persistence of the regime itself as a measure of legitimacy, or the (in) frequency and number of constitutional amendments in states with constitutions, or other possible indicators.

Frequently, legitimacy is determined in retrospect, in a circular fashion. If a regime falls, it is because, ultimately, it lacked legitimacy. But before it fell, we were not sure. There is, unfortunately, no sure way around problems of measuring legitimacy.

Even in open societies, it is not clear that public opinion polls really reveal the legitimacy of the political system. Often, polling prompts us to think about issues that aren’t the first things on people’s minds. They force respondents to address issues that they may not even be concerned with, and the questioners want immediate responses, rather than more reflective and leisurely consideration of the issues surveyed.

In China, public opinion polling is even more problematic. First, until very recently, it is almost impossible to get a true random, representative sample. Second, almost any question about politics is fraught, and it is doubtful that Chinese respondents would be completely truthful to interviewers, especially strangers on a phone. Polling in China may catch popular fevers and impressions, but it is far from clear that real public opinion is being revealed, or whether the revealed attitudes are anything more than
transitory impressions. This is not to gainsay the arduous efforts people like Tianjin Shi, Chen Jie, Wenfang Tang, Pierre Landry, Iain Johnston (and Shen Mingming) have made to advance the state of the public opinion art in China, and to bring as rigorous studies as currently possible forward. But there remain reasons for skepticism. Nonetheless, public opinion research may remain the only way to try to answer fundamental questions about ideas, beliefs, values, politics, and legitimacy in China.

It is thus unlikely that we can definitively say whether a political system is legitimate or not from rigorously assembled evidence. Indeed, legitimacy is inherently contingent, subject to change in light of state or popular actions, exogenous shocks or other conjunctural developments. We can have a reasonable basis for saying that the US political system is legitimate, but that legitimacy is not necessarily permanent and unchanging. The degree of that legitimacy has changed over time, as surely the Civil War shows. It may also be reasonable to argue that the US political system is more legitimate than China’s. But I am not sure how I could prove it.

Some have argued that the widespread protests in China are a mark of its illegitimacy, or that rising numbers of protests speak to declining legitimacy. The protests certainly suggest failures of government performance. But is that a failure only at the local level, or is it systemic? Even when there are government failures, does that mean that the system is illegitimate?

I could go on with problems with the concept of legitimacy and its assessment. But let me use the above as a preamble to make an argument about legitimacy in contemporary China. I believe that the current regime is by and large legitimate, and will try to explicate why I think that is so.
Legitimacy is the quality that inheres in a polity when the populace believes that the political system is just, appropriate or right. In other words, the populace grants authority to the regime, and in turn, the regime has the right to expect the populace to obey government directives without undo coercion (admittedly a very difficult standard to measure). Having this quality of legitimacy provides the regime and society with a reservoir of social cohesion and support when times turn bad, for whatever reason. This staking and accepting of claims is a largely social contractarian view of legitimacy, and not one as central in Chinese political traditions. In the West, as in a true contract, the parties to the contract have legal equality and standing. State and society have equal and mutual obligations and rights. (In the West, we may have at least partially deluded ourselves into thinking about how freely and independently we have entered into social contracts with governments—but exploring the mythology behind the social contract is neither my purpose here, nor one that I am particularly well equipped to undertake.) To be sure, there was a contract central to legitimacy in China, but it was the contract between the ruler and heaven (god). In exchange for benevolent rulership and the performance of proper rituals, heaven would bring good harvests and so on, and the kingdom would be peaceful and prosperous. Famines and other calamities were signs of heaven’s disapproval, and because of this, at least for Mencius, drawing on the Shu Jing, it was right for the people to rebel. But the contract here is not among equals (and thus not a true contract in modern Western legal traditions), but an agreement among nested patrons and clients, with heaven the senior patron and the ruler the client, but authorized to be the patron to the people, his clients. Thus for Mencius, it is right for the people to
rebel because the authority of the ruler has been removed by heaven; the mandate has been lost.

If we accept that legitimacy is the acceptance by the populace (including importantly, those elements of the populace who are state employees) that it is appropriate for the current regime to exercise authority, then a critical, and I think underappreciated aspect of legitimacy, relates to identity issues. A second, more universal prop for legitimacy is whether people are satisfied with their lives as a whole. If the state projects and the populace accepts a largely similar sense of identity, then, other things being equal, the state has gone a long way to securing its legitimacy. This understanding of legitimacy is either analogous to Gramscian hegemony of the political-economic order, or it is the same thing (though of course for Gramsci, a capitalist political economy was by its nature illegitimate). If people think that their lives are going well and will continue to go well, that too greatly assists state efforts to persist.

It is correct and important to explicate the growing limits on the CCP to monopolize or even manage control of information in China. New media, commercialization, ever deepening international contacts and other factors have all undermined the pre-reform propaganda system. Nonetheless, it also seems to me that there are basic continuities in the identity put forward by the state and with the concerns of Chinese state builders, reformers, and others going back to at least Yan Fu, and other elements of Chinese statecraft going way back into Chinese history.

The formal ideology of the CCP is of little interest to almost everyone in China. The informal ideology of Chinese statism, as it has emerged over the last 100 or so years is not, and I would argue that it is widely, and almost unreflexively accepted. That
statism sees China confronting a difficult if not hostile global environment. A strong state is required to survive in this global environment. That state should be staffed by the best and the brightest, those most capable of dealing with the challenges China faces. Recruiting the best and the brightest to serve the state is precisely what the “three represents” is about, a claim to a different kind of elitism for the dominant (no longer vanguard) party. Given the global challenges, the pursuit of wealth and power have been and remain core state (and societal) goals. To insure rapid progress on promoting wealth and power, society needs to be controlled and unified through a basically strong hand of the state. The economy has to be guided by experts staffing the state, and China’s military has to be strong.

In other words, the idea of saving the country (qiuguo) remains at the heart of Chinese identity concerns. Enlightenment appeals to some, but they are a very small minority (admittedly the CCP membership was a very small minority in the 20s, 30s, and into the 40s, so simply being a small minority now does not necessarily predict the future). The CCP puts forth the view that it is uniquely capable of advancing the agenda of the Chinese nation, and superficially at least, since the end of the Mao period, it can produce factoids that seem to prove the case—economic growth, rising prosperity, greater international status and influence, greater power.

At the same time, the old propaganda system remains fairly effective at discrediting counter-hegemonic discourses. This is not because of new technologies and messages, though there is some of that, but because of the simple repeated drumbeat of the defects of democracy, of the consequences of not controlling population growth, of how nefarious elements outside of China can cooperate with disloyal elements within to
weaken, if not overthrow, the regime, and bring about “chaos” and a return to China being the sick man of Asia. And for those who don’t get the message, the heavy hand of state coercion, both officially and in alliance with some social groups, is there to suppress those who disagree.

Of course, at a high enough level of generality, one can “prove” almost anything. How would I go about actually proving that the informal ideology portrayed above really represents a hegemonic identity and rules of statecraft? How could I show that people in China widely buy into it without much reflection? In turn how can I show that this means that the current regime is widely regarded as legitimate?

In fact, I am not sure how one can persuasively make this case (or most cases about legitimacy). But let me point to several pieces of suggestive potential evidence. One comes from Gloria Davies challenging Worrying about China. Drawing from this rich work, we see Chinese scholars committed to post-modernism who refuse to de-center “worrying about China” from their core concerns; believing that there remain absolute truths about what to do about China; and the moralism and search for perfection that drives their work. While many may not completely share the CCP’s identity of China and its state-societal identity, the quest for the ideal solution implies the need for a strong state. But China’s 20th Century history makes either revolution or “chaos” undesirable conditions. In practice, the new (old) epistemologies of China’s critical thinkers divides and factionalizes them, as truth remains absolute, and so disagreement is about who has the “real” truth.

To be sure, there are thinkers and advocates in China who sincerely believe in liberal democratic capitalism, and the critical thinkers Davies’ examines are certainly not
the only intellectuals in China. (Dan Lynch’s stimulating argument about the
democratization of China meaning the de-centering of China is exactly right. The
problem is that there aren’t all that many in China who want to be “de-centered.”) But if
the ostensibly most critical and cosmopolitan (?) of China’s intellectuals essentially buy
into the CCP’s informal definition of the problematic of “China,” this suggest to me a
significant measure of the hegemony of the CCP (in the Gramscian sense).

A second set of material supporting a view of the legitimacy of the current regime
does indeed come from a variety of public opinion surveys in China. As noted, we may
have no choice but to use these materials. Obviously, the 2008 Pew Global Attitudes
Survey provided exceptionally positive results (it was explicitly a non-random sample).
Tony Saich’s recent surveys of degree of satisfaction by level of government show very
high degrees of support for the central government, dropping as one asks about lower
strata of governance. But over the 2003-2007 period (a period of rapid economic growth
admittedly), satisfaction with all levels of government increased.

Questions about satisfaction with government performance are undoubtedly
among the most problematic in public opinion surveys in China. So we should not invest
too much in these reports (though certainly someone like Saich has a sophisticated
understanding of the pitfalls of public opinion research in China). But they are
suggestive, even in the case of the Pew survey that over-represents the urban, educated
coastal and emerging middle class. But the emerging middle class in urban, coastal areas
may also be particularly important for the future of the regime.

Inglehart has argued that satisfaction with life as a whole is a stronger predictor of
stability in a democracy than is satisfaction with the political system. Dickson argues
(and shows) that this insight can be usefully applied to China as well. Again, at least prior to 2009, surveys show high levels of personal satisfaction, and questions here are probably less fraught than ones asking about satisfaction with government performance. One background factor informing answers to questions about personal satisfaction concerns what comparisons do Chinese use when asked this question. Is it their own lived experience (particularly for older Chinese), when for them, life may never have been better? Is it various media portrayals of “the good life” (particularly for the young), who may compare what they have now with TV soaps, movies, etc, and find their condition wanting (but this may only spur them to work harder to obtain what others appear to have)? Many, many Chinese have powerful and wide-ranging complaints against “the system” and some are deeply dissatisfied. But the optimism and confidence that many others exude (and is strongly emphasized in the official message of the media) is also palpable.

Of these two sources of legitimacy—convergence on a broadly shared identity where the regime can show itself to be the answer to China’s problems, and levels of (high) personal satisfaction—the former is less likely to be affected by immediate changes in performance, whereas personal satisfaction is probably more linked to regime performance. But the significance of personal satisfaction, as opposed to satisfaction with government performance, is that personal satisfaction is a more diffuse basis of support that can be obtained in multiple social arenas and contexts. Thus, short term declines in economic performance, and things like the J-curve, may be somewhat less of a problem than would be the case with (dis)satisfaction with government performance.
The CCP does face the challenge of rising expectations (clearly linked to personal satisfaction) that is indeed performance based.

This essay has attempted to qualify, at least a bit, the widespread view that the CCP’s claims to legitimacy rest on economic growth and nationalism. The consequences of the CCP’s attempts to pursue legitimation via such claims has been widely discussed, and Shirk and Gries provided representative examples. To oversimplify, if growth slows substantially, the system may be in trouble. Popular nationalism can (or has) emerge(d) fairly autonomously, which is not so easily controlled by the CCP, and may constrain the leadership’s range of policy choices, especially in dealing with Taiwan, Japan, and the US. If the regime is seen as soft or compromising, a popular nationalist backlash may occur, again undermining support.

The significance of seeing the legitimacy of the regime from the perspective argued here is that it generates different sets of concerns and or predictions. First, it suggests that if state and society largely share a common identity, or at least a common understanding of the problematic of governance, then oppositional movements will have a hard time articulating persuasive alternative discourses or visions of state and society. They can dispute how well the regime is addressing the core issues of the problematic, but their solution to the problems posed by the regime’s poor handling of the central concerns of the state are going to look a lot like what the incumbents are doing. Second, even if the regime fell (which, if the regime is legitimate, is hard to explain) the successor state would be likely to continue to following the basic patterns inherent in this identity that has a widespread following in society. Finally, with satisfaction with one’s life overall as a standard of legitimacy or at least stability, the regime may not be quite so
dependent on generating 8% growth per year to survive and retain legitimacy. In the short-term other possible sources of satisfaction may compensate for economic downturns. Moreover, while in the longer term, personal satisfaction and economic growth are positively related to each other, the actual amount of growth may not matter. As long as people believe that their quality of life is ok, but that it will continue to improve in the future, this may be more than sufficient for political stability, if not legitimacy. In other words, provided the government or society provides some basis for broad personal satisfaction, the attainment of particular levels of growth does not matter very much.

These different understandings of regime legitimation in China thus yield different understandings of sources of strength and strain. Obviously, we and the Chinese cannot know the future, but one approach sees the legitimacy of the regime as much more contingent, and indeed, fragile. The other suggests that regime legitimacy is stronger than is usually appreciated in the West, and that the core characteristics of governance and state-society relations are likely to be fairly stable for a considerable period of time.