

## *Evolving State-Society Relations in China: Introduction*<sup>\*</sup>

Fengshi Wu

This special volume attempts to enhance the understanding of a seemingly paradoxical pair of patterns in contemporary Chinese politics, namely, the resilience of the Communist regime and the robustness of social autonomy. The papers, while contributing to the central theme from different sectors/subfields, converge on the aspect where the agencies of the Chinese state and the society interact and exert influence on each other. Instead of simply giving away summaries and revealing intricate findings, this introduction focuses on the overall scope and shared analytical perspective of all the papers included, and the interlinkages across them in order to facilitate the reading of the whole volume.

Over 25 years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the heralding of “the end of history,”<sup>1</sup> China has nevertheless emerged as a regional

---

**Fengshi Wu** is Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She specializes in civil society and politics in contemporary China, environmental politics, and global governance. Correspondence should be sent to: [isfswu@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isfswu@ntu.edu.sg).

\* All papers for this volume were first presented at the workshop “Political Reform and Social Stability,” which was organized by the China Program (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and held in Singapore, 8–9 January 2016. The guest editor, on behalf of all the contributing authors, would like to acknowledge the support provided by the teams at RSIS and the valuable input by all the other workshop participants including James Char, Chen Xuelian, Li Mingjiang, Christoph Steinhardt, and Zhang Hongzhou. All authors would like to particularly thank Professors Jing Yuejin, Margaret Pearson, Forrest Zhang, Zhang Jing, and Zheng Yongnian and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable feedback.

and global power without fundamentally conceding Communism as the state ideology. Meanwhile, self-organized associations, protests (both on- and off-line), policy advocacy, citizen journalism, grassroots elections, and other forms of active practice of modern citizenship have flourished to varying degrees in all parts of China. Again and again, survey data, case studies, and critical event analysis have shown that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) state enjoys legitimacy and popular support at home, in spite of warnings from abroad.<sup>2</sup> This is indeed a major paradoxical case for the field of transitology; however, China experts have produced a body of literature that reveals some of the mechanisms via which the Chinese state has endured the revival of social autonomy and the rise of collective resistance, activism, and policy advocacy in the post-reform era.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, the party-state has been effective in learning and adapting to new situations, and succeeded in adjusting the existing system to cope with changes and satisfy new demands from diverse segments of the society such as laid-off workers, ethnic minorities, farmers, and urban middle-class.<sup>4</sup> When these segments cannot be placated, the state seeks to compensate the victims and suppress the rebels. On the other hand, most social organizations, intermediaries, independent advocacy groups, activists, and public intellectuals have refrained from open and broad contestation against the regime, while gaining the autonomy to reach goals and push for changes from bottom-up.<sup>5</sup>

Approaching the same outcome from opposite angles, the above two lines of explanation on state-society relations in China, nevertheless, converge on one important analytical perspective: in order to search for the causes of macro-level political stability in China, one needs to dig into the micro-level, sector-specific and contextualized state-society interactions, both mutual influences and sometimes contestations. This perspective is shared by all the authors of the volume. The six papers in this volume show the pervasive, though sometimes implicit, illusive, and unintended, mutual embeddedness between state agencies and various social forces during the late years of Hu Jintao's era and the first few years of Xi Jinping's leadership. Each paper, from different angles, explains various forms of coexistence and mutual embeddedness of state efforts at co-optation and penetration of society, and resistance and exercise of agency by social actors.

Under the broad rubric of state-society relations, this volume covers

issue areas ranging from public health and social welfare to party affairs and national Five-Year Plans. It engages with important debates in the China field related to authoritarian resilience, civil society development, strategic group, and social identity formation. Most of the empirical materials were gathered from local levels—the “trenches”<sup>6</sup> of public governance—to illustrate in detail the state’s steering strategies, society’s coping methods, and the changing patterns of state-society interactions. While the first three papers look more into the Chinese state (Korolev, Yan and Huang, and McCarthy), the other three papers examine more from the societal side (Schubert and Heberer, Wu, and Cliff). Korolev’s paper opens the volume with a study of the new “mass line” as a strategy of state-led social mobilization to diversify and obtain policy input, particularly from the least empowered. In contrast, Cliff’s paper closes the volume with an anthropological account of societal agency, and avoidance of state oversight by self-grown welfare funds in rural villages. These two papers bookend the conceptual spectrum of the volume.

Although the papers individually present rich empirical materials from a particular part of Chinese politics, they resonate with each other in many ways. Korolev’s study of CCP’s reviving of the “mass line” method to mobilize public participation for reforming the health care system and formulating the 12th Five-Year Plan in the 2010s provides not only an illustration of continuity and change of state’s intention to guide and manage the public for the purpose of policy making and responding to the population’s basic needs, but also a prelude for the next two papers. Yan and Huang and McCarthy extend the discussion started by Korolev on the micro-adjusted strategies and methods used by the party-state to exert its influence over the society as a way to respond to the diversifying social demands, particularly in two sectors: private companies and industries, and religion-related social organizations.

While sharing many observations of the political contexts in China with the first three papers, the remaining papers of the volume focus more on the counter-strategies pursued by social actors to protect and articulate their own interests and collective identities vis-à-vis the state. According to Schubert and Heberer’s long-term fieldwork in multiple municipalities across China, private entrepreneurs nowadays enjoy substantial negotiating power to not only resist the state’s attempt to impose its agenda, but also influence policy implementation, and bring about institutional changes often unintended by the state. More

importantly, they find a growing perception of collective identity shared by private entrepreneurs, which can reinforce their willingness to resist the policies that hurt their interests. This study addresses some of the questions raised at the end of Yan and Huang's paper, and together the two papers present two essential aspects of the evolving government-business relations in China.

Concurring with Schubert and Heberer, Wu emphasizes the importance of social identity formation (in addition to collective bargaining experiences) among critical groups, and uses data from a unique survey to examine activists and NGO practitioners' ideas and articulations on their profession and community. Wu's paper strengthens the volume as a whole by emphasizing the ideational dimension in the study of state-society relations in China, and demonstrating the use of new methods for exploring this dimension. Both McCarthy and Wu's papers examine NGOs, social entrepreneurs, and activists — social groups that in theory have the potential to exert great political impact on the Communist regime, yet in the Chinese context still struggle to develop their own autonomy, collective identities, and shared strategies. At the same time, state agencies — particularly lower-ranked technocrats — are closely watching the success of NGOs and adjusting their own attitudes and actions toward NGO practitioners.

Cliff's paper, the last in the volume, investigates the historical development and basic workings of welfare funds in rural villages in China. Central to this still-unfolding practice are the personalized interactions between fund leaders, village people, and formal governmental authorities at grassroots levels, as all of them attempt to shape or adjust to the institutional outcomes of these funds to serve their own ends. This paper echoes some of the main findings in the previous papers, and show how particular social elites in today's China, through both hidden and open negotiations and contestations with state authorities, can sometimes "ignore" the state and independently mobilize resources and innovate local governance.

By the time the authors of this volume convened and discussed their research, China had entered a new political era led by its fifth generation of party leaders. Soon after Xi Jinping came to power, the initial high hopes and positive assessments of the anticorruption campaign by overseas China experts started to wane. China observers have become increasingly critical of the authoritarian, or even totalitarian direction the Chinese state is heading, given more evidence of selective (or politically

motivated) anticorruption arrests and clamping down of rights lawyers, foreign activists, artists, NGO practitioners, and book sellers in Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup> This timely volume offers insights into the changing state-society dynamics and their implication for Chinese politics.

## Notes

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- 2 For most recent assessment of CCP's popular support and legitimacy, see Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Martin K. Whyte, "China's Dormant and Active Social Volcanoes," *China Journal*, Vol. 75 (2016), pp. 9–37; Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 3 On "authoritarian resilience" in China, see Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2003), pp. 6–17; Yongshun Cai, "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38 (2008), pp. 411–432; Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert P. Weller, "Responsive Authoritarianism," in *Political Change in China: Comparison with Taiwan*, edited by Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), pp. 117–134; Xiaojun Yan, "Regime Inclusion and the Resilience of Authoritarianism: The Local People's Political Consultative Conference in Post-Mao Chinese Politics," *China Journal*, Vol. 66 (2011), pp. 53–75; Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Nicola Dean, "The CCP's Learning System: Thought Unification and Regime Adaptation," *China Journal*, Vol. 69 (2013), pp. 87–107; Stephen Noakes, "The Role of Political Science in China: Intellectuals and Authoritarian Resilience," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 129, No. 2 (2014), pp. 239–260.
- 4 Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000); Scott Kennedy, *The Business of Lobbying in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Yongshun Cai, *Collective*

- Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 5 This is not to dismiss the circles of political dissidents and human rights lawyers who have openly called for regime change, but to give a brief overall assessment of the situation. William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 170 (2002), pp. 345–360; Anthony J. Spiers, "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 117, No. 1 (2011), 1–45; Susan K. McCarthy, "Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China," *China Journal*, Vol. 70 (2013), pp. 48–72; Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins, *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Fengshi Wu, "Environmental Activism in Provincial China," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2013), pp. 89–108; Tom Cliff, "Post-socialist Aspirations in a Neo-Danwei," *China Journal*, No. 73 (2015), pp. 132–157; Li Fu, "The Politics of Everyday Subsistence Strategies and Hidden Resistance among Herders in China," *China Journal*, Vol. 76 (2016), pp. 63–77. For political dissidents and more radical antiregime activists, see Merle Goldman, "Politically-Engaged Intellectuals in the 1990s," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 159 (1999), pp. 700–711; Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: Struggle for Political Rights in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Eva Pils, *China's Human Rights Lawyers: Advocacy and Resistance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
  - 6 Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 4.
  - 7 Roderick MacFarquhar, "China: The Superpower of Mr. Xi," *New York Review of Books*, 13 August 2015; Willy Lam, "Xi's Obsession with 'Cultural Renaissance' Raises Fears of Another Cultural Revolution," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (February 2016); "Beware the Cult of Xi," *Economist*, 2 April 2016.