IS CHINA UNSTABLE?
ASSESSING THE FACTORS

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Chinese Social Trends:
Stability or Chaos?

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In recent years attempts to analyze and predict political and social trends in the PRC have yielded wildly divergent scenarios. In what might be termed the "stability" scenario, it is noted that China has been much more successful than Russia or Eastern European countries in implementing market reforms while simultaneously raising living standards. The general improvements in people's lives and the many new opportunities for enrichment available are seen as leading to acceptance of the political status quo, or even gratitude. When combined with the political lessons of the 1989 crackdown, these features of the Chinese situation are said to lead most Chinese to have little interest in politics or inclination to take risks to press for political changes. As long as China's leaders remain unified and can keep the engine of economic growth going, according to this scenario, they should be able to maintain the status quo and keep social tensions and conflicts under control.

A very different set of considerations is stressed in what might be termed the "chaos" scenario. This alternative stresses the wrenching and destabilizing impact of the shift from a socialist to a market system. As established ways of doing things and forms of security provided by socialist institutions are undermined, many Chinese struggle to cope and to learn how to operate in the new system. All around them they see reemerging the "social evils" that socialism was supposed to eliminate—foreign ownership, landlordism, prostitution, criminal syndicates, etc.

Inequalities in income and wealth grow rapidly, and the conviction is widely shared that those who are monopolizing the gains are doing so through connections and corruption, rather than due to entrepreneurship, hard work, or great skill. The previous moral orthodoxy provided by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought is in shambles, but no alternative moral vision has arisen to fill the vacuum. Increasingly Chinese see their society as characterized by an amoral, man-eat-man struggle, and in this context leaders at all levels are seen as venal and self-serving. Political controls and coercion may keep popular anger hidden much of the time and yield an appearance of political stability, but underneath the surface popular anger remains at high levels, and a variety of incidents and trends may lead to large-scale protests and political crises. In urban areas, in particular, residual hostility stemming from the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 increases the popular anger directed at the CCP. The chaos scenario, then, leads one to see China's leadership as sitting on top of a social volcano that may erupt at any moment.[1]

When confronted with such contradictory assessments of the situation, one is inevitably reminded of the fable of the blind men groping at different extremities of an elephant and trying to figure out what it is. As a sociologist I make no claim to be able to predict the future. However, this chapter will attempt to describe the broader context of the changes in China since 1978 in the hope that this context will help us judge the likelihood that a variety of social trends and tensions will threaten China's political stability. As the reader will see, this assessment will lead to the conclusion that there is considerable truth to the trends and dynamics stressed by both the "stability" and "chaos" scenarios, although not necessarily to the conclusions drawn from them. In other words, this analysis should lead to a greater understanding of the shape of the Chinese social elephant, but not necessarily to an ability to confidently predict whether that elephant will remain passive or go on a rampage.

Transformed State-Society Relations

Conventional wisdom holds that Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues presided over an attempt to reform the Chinese economy while preventing changes in the PRC's party-dominated political institutions. However, even cursory examination reveals that the major changes that have swept China since 1978 have not been confined to the economic realm. China

is a very different society politically (as well as culturally and otherwise) than it was at the time of Mao's death, and the fundamental changes that have occurred in the nature of state-society relations increase the difficulty of ruling the world's most populous society. In order to understand these changes it is necessary to briefly review the nature of the political and social order of the late-Mao era.

While China at the end of the Mao era is sometimes characterized as an egalitarian socialist order, the reality was more like a rigid, hierarchical form of feudalism with a strong admixture of Confucian statecraft. Individuals and families were either born into (in the case of rural communes) or bureaucratically allocated to (in the case of urban work units) relatively closed organizational cells where they served at the pleasure of the state. There was little in the way of free movement of people and information across the organizational boundaries of this cellular system. While there were strenuous efforts to provide social security and relatively egalitarian distribution of income and social services within each cell, the cells themselves were arranged in a vast and very unequal hierarchy. Access to income, opportunities, information, and everything else varied sharply depending upon where you were in the bureaucratic system. The social world of those in advantaged cells (e.g., in resource-rich central work units located in urban areas) was profoundly different from those at the bottom of the system of bureaucratic ranks and caste-like groups (e.g., individuals in poor villages in the hinterlands, members of political pariah groups).

Authority over this feudal-like hierarchy rested in the CCP and ultimately in its leader, Mao Zedong. The CCP used its control over information and communications to ensure that no rival ideas could compete with the official Marxist-Leninist-Maoist orthodoxy. Extraordinary efforts were regularly made to indoctrinate all citizens into this faith and to use political study, criticism rituals, campaigns, and coercion to ensure that critical and alternative viewpoints could not be spread and threaten faith in the official orthodoxy.[2] That orthodoxy stressed themes such as individual and group sacrifice in the pursuit of the distant goals of socialism and communism, the constancy of class struggle, and veneration of Mao Zedong. Experiences of life in Maoist China produced personal hardship and family tragedies for many. However, any tendency to translate such experiences into shared grievances against the system, the CCP, and Mao was generally squelched by the quasi-totalitarian nature of CCP control over the social order and communications. No gen-

eral public opinion could emerge within this social order, and individuals who harbored doubts or hostility toward Mao and the CCP tended to feel that they were isolated and out of step with the vast masses of enthusiastic citizens around them, comrades who were devotedly building socialism under the wise leadership of Mao. Getting ahead or just getting by depended primarily on currying favor with the bureaucratic gatekeepers in charge of your cell, rather than on any attempt to escape from your lot or to join with others to challenge the system.[3]

When the late-Mao social and political order is described in these shorthand terms, it immediately becomes apparent that this order has since been transformed in multiple and fundamental ways. Those changes began to occur already during the Cultural Revolution, and not simply after 1978. Although the Cultural Revolution appeared at times to be the zenith of totalitarian controls over the masses, the reality was more complex. The entire edifice of Party organizational controls and regular indoctrination of the masses fell apart for several years (roughly from mid-1966 until at least 1969), as did cellular controls on the movement of people and information. During periods of Cultural Revolution chaos, large numbers of people were on the move across the face of China (particularly, but not exclusively, young people). They had unprecedented opportunities to observe their society directly and to talk to individuals from other locales and walks of life without the normal supervision and controls of their unit's organizational discipline. This period of extended personal autonomy had a profound impact on the outlooks of many Chinese citizens, especially as their observations of rural poverty, elite arrogance and corruption, and violence contrasted sharply with the faiths they had absorbed prior to the Cultural Revolution. Even though Mao and his colleagues tried to revive the CCP and its systems of political controls and indoctrination after 1969, the damage proved irreparable. Many Chinese citizens by the early 1970s held an altered and darker picture of the nature of their social order, even though they knew that it was still dangerous to share this view with others.

The post-Mao changes ended this attempt to restore the former system of totalitarian control over people and ideas and fundamentally altered the nature of state-society relations. As noted earlier, there were multiple aspects of this transformation. The combination of the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution (and, by implication, of Mao's leadership) and the shift from a system of bureaucratic allocation to market distribution further undermined faith in the previous Marxist-Leninist-

Mao Zedong Thought orthodoxy. The open door policy also brought into China vast infusions of alternative ideas and cultural forms from which Chinese citizens had previously been isolated. At the same time the belief that China was at the vanguard of the advance toward a better socialist future was replaced by official recognition that China was falling behind and needed to do whatever was necessary to avoid being left in the dust by more rapidly developing countries in Asia. The relaxation of CCP controls over acceptable styles of behavior, dress, culture, religion, and thinking combined with mass rehabilitations of victims of earlier campaigns had similar effects. These changes encouraged pluralism of thought and behavior and undermined any remaining view that there was only one proper, "proletarian" way for everyone to think and behave. The cellular walls of China's bureaucratic hierarchy also began to decay, with large scale migration occurring and a growing opportunity (or necessity) for individuals to leave the eroding security of their own units to compete in the new market environment. By the 1990s the socialist "social contract" had been fundamentally weakened, with security of employment, compensation, housing, health care, education, and other basics of life increasingly threatened, requiring individual and family decisions and investments in place of bureaucratic provision.

There are a variety of formulations that have been used to characterize the changes in the Chinese political economy resulting from China's reforms. For example, analysts describe the shift of China from a totalitarian to an authoritarian system, from bureaucratic allocation to market distribution, and from a socialist social contract to a new social contract based upon competition for individual and family enrichment. Whatever the particular rubric favored, there is general consensus that the political atmosphere in the PRC has been dramatically altered. Individuals and families have substantially more autonomy in most areas of their personal lives than they had in the Mao era, with their human rights less systematically violated.[4] They are exposed to a variety of forms of culture, ideas, and values, rather than to the monochromatic proletarian straight-jacket of the late Mao era. Public opinion has emerged as a political force in contemporary China, with the CCP hard-pressed to counter attitudes and opinions that differ from the official line. Individuals no longer feel surrounded by zealous activists who will denounce them if they make a comment that deviates from the approved orthodoxy. Instead in some instances remaining "true believers" may feel isolated in the midst of increasingly critical and cynical colleagues. Po-

litical jokes at the expense of China's leaders which would have led to personal disaster in the late-Mao era are now widely shared and enjoyed. I imagine Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and their colleagues feeling they suffer from a Chinese version of the "Rodney Dangerfield" syndrome—no matter what they do, they "don't get no respect." Clearly this is not a system which has maintained its political system intact while changing its economy.[5]

One might argue that in many respects the changes that have occurred in China since the 1970s, when taken as a whole, can be interpreted as indicating that the country is becoming a more "normal" society after a decidedly abnormal, totalitarian interlude during Mao's rule. And in any normal society, one might generalize, having vibrant and volatile public opinion trends and a healthy disrespect for political leaders should not pose a particular threat to the stability of the system. Indeed, it is a commonplace of political analysis that political systems which allow people to express their views and even their anger and thus provide "safety valves" for such sentiments are likely to be more stable than political systems which keep such feelings bottled up.

However, there are several problems with using this sort of "return to normalcy" argument to favor the "stability" over the "chaos" scenario. First, both China's imperial and socialist histories and the partial nature of the political changes since 1978 make the "safety valve" metaphor problematic. As Frank Parkin observed long ago in a related context, one of the virtues of a fully developed capitalistic system is that individual discontent tends to be vented in multiple directions—against rivals, one's own failings, the vagaries of the market, or fate, for example—and not primarily against the state. However, in a state socialist or other redistributive system, there is a very strong tendency for the state to be either credited or blamed for what happens in people's lives.[6] Market reforms may have been calculated by Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues to eventually lessen the tendency of popular feelings to be focused on the state, but at present the state's hand in the PRC is very far from being "invisible." Thus Jiang Zemin and his colleagues cannot take much comfort in the hope that their citizens will express their discontents in various and politically unthreatening ways. At present the leadership will continue to have good reason to fear the tendency for such popular feelings to be readily converted into anger at the system and the CCP itself.

A related reason why the expression of popular discontent cannot be presumed by the CCP to be normal and non-threatening stems from the

party's efforts to maintain its dominant organizational role in the altered political atmosphere of contemporary China. With intermediate associations and institutions remaining weak, hobbled by CCP supervision, or absent, the population may often feel that there are few or no viable channels through which their grievances and demands for redress may be fairly expressed and acted upon. Even though some aspects of the reforms, such as legal institutionalization and experiments with labor arbitration, are designed to overcome this problem, China's reality at present is one in which procedures for dealing with popular grievances remain weak and ad hoc. And as Samuel Huntington observed long ago, political systems which arouse high popular expectations without developing effective institutional mechanisms for handling such feelings within the system are asking for trouble.[7]

To sum up, the changes in China since the Mao era have produced a major alteration in the relationship between the CCP and the population. While elements of these changes may eventually help to promote political stability, at the moment there remains a problematic situation. The CCP can no longer so effectively control mass sentiments and their public expression, and indeed a major reason for this change is that in the Deng era the CCP has not normally tried to do so. However, when popular discontent increases and particularly when it gets translated into mass demonstrations, the CCP tends to feel threatened but at the same time to lack effective mechanisms for responding. The CCP's response is often to fall back on its repertoire of political rituals from the Mao era—for example, by declaring the actions in question a threat to the system, launching a political campaign, and using coercion to eliminate the leaders of such demonstrations while scaring any followers. (Witness the "three speaks" campaign aimed at elites and the over-the-top assault on the *Falun Gong* sect launched in 1999.) Given the wholesale loss of credibility of the ideological symbols used by the CCP to justify such responses, as well as the general popular distaste for the political rituals of the Mao era, these habitual regime responses are not effective ways to rebuild respect for the CCP and its leaders.

The immediately preceding comments might be interpreted as leading to a prediction that favors the "chaos" rather than the "stability" scenario. However, such a conclusion would be premature and oversimplified. My comments to this point indicate that I agree with the portions of the "chaos" scenario that imply that many Chinese individuals and groups are suspicious, cynical, and angry about recent trends. As a

result we can expect to see China's leaders at all levels struggling in the years ahead to deal with actual and potential mass contentiousness and fearful of the potential for "chaos." However, evidence on mass movements and collective action around the world indicates that it takes much more than grass roots discontent and anger to produce social movements that can threaten a nation's political stability. Translating popular resentments into serious threats to the system requires a large number of intervening conditions to be present. A listing of the conditions for such a mobilization might include the following:

- grass-roots anger, discontent, and alienation
- the opportunity to broadly share such sentiments with others
- structures promoting social solidarity among the aggrieved
- resources (time, financial, organizational, etc.) to use to pursue the interests of the aggrieved and act on their demands
- sufficient autonomy to be able to resist official dependency and blandishments
- effective leadership willing to take substantial risks to further group demands
- a set of ideas, demands, and moral claims with broad mass appeal beyond the aggrieved group
- opportunities to forge alliances with and recruit support from other groups
- conditions that direct popular anger upward against the central state and its leaders and undermine their legitimacy
- weaknesses or constraints within the state leadership which prevent a unified and effective response and/or which lead potential demonstrators to feel they will receive support or even immunity from coercion from factions within the elite.[8]

Given this laundry list of preconditions, we may conclude that if China remains politically stable in the future, this could be due to some combination of popular satisfaction, passivity, and fear, as the "stability" scenario implies. However, it could instead be due to the regime's skill and/or luck in squelching the many expected grass roots conflicts and protests that occur before they escalate into forms that threaten the system.

China's Current Social Tensions

With these comments as a background, we move into more speculative terrain. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to brief

consideration of a variety of current sources of social tension and conflict in Chinese society, with some thoughts about which are likely to prove most serious or difficult to keep from escalating into a challenge to regime stability. Among those social tensions and disgruntled groups most often listed as potential threats to the system are the following:

- Ethnic tensions between minorities and Han Chinese.
- Resentments of those in China's interior against the favored coastal regions.
- Anger of Chinese peasants against their low status and persistent mistreatment.
- Discontented and rootless members of China's "floating population."
- Hostility of SOE workers, laid-off workers, and pensioners at their loss of status, benefits, and security.
- Alienation of students and intellectuals.
- Alternative faiths and sects à la *Falun Gong*.

What are the conditions likely to make each of these potential sources of tension either a manageable or a very serious threat to China's political stability?

Ethnic tensions: The general relaxation of political controls in the post-Mao period reviewed earlier in this paper has allowed a significant resurgence of cultural and religious activity among China's non-sinicized minority nationalities. Particularly in Tibet and in Xinjiang, these trends have led to recurrent protests and challenges to Chinese rule, and to the mobilization of state coercion and controls in response. Several conditions seem likely to make these problems continue, including increased Han migration into minority regions and greater awareness of, and contacts with, ethnic and religious brethren outside China's borders. However, the peripheral location of the most serious conflicts and the lack of any signs of substantial support among Han Chinese for minority rights make it seem unlikely that these tensions could be translated into a general threat to China's political stability.[9]

Regional Inequality and Resentments from China's Interior: It seems quite clear that state policy and economic development trends since 1978 have further exacerbated already large disparities in income and living conditions between interior regions and provinces and favored coastal locations. A number of Chinese political figures have worried aloud that

if nothing is done to redress these growing disparities they will threaten China's stability. However, this seems quite unlikely. Provinces and regions are large and amorphous units that do not lend themselves to strong popular attachments and protest mobilizations. Furthermore, the implied outcome of this kind of destabilization—a fragmentation of the Chinese state into component provinces or other subunits—would only compound the disadvantages of those presently living in interior regions. Unless other considerations argue for the benefits of separation (as with Tibet and Xinjiang), regional disparity trends are likely to lead instead to a variety of efforts by those in the interior to get a better share of the pie of a unified China—through changes in state policy, economic concessions, migration, etc.[10]

Angry Peasants: There are lots of signs that many in the Chinese countryside are angry about their lot and increasingly likely to become contentious. There are a variety of reasons for such sentiments. After being the prime beneficiaries of China's reforms in the early 1980s, China's peasants have increasingly been losing out compared to urbanites. As a result, the gap between average rural and urban incomes has widened since the mid-1980s to levels that are higher than they were in 1978 and unusually large compared to other developing societies.[11] Chinese peasants also bear the brunt of an extraordinarily coercive state-mandated family planning system that makes it very difficult for millions of families to realize cherished fertility goals. Many peasants find that they are at the mercy of local officials who regularly impose extra taxes and fees to support favored projects and blatantly ignore state efforts to outlaw such "excess burdens." Although they are freer than in the Mao era to move around and seek economic opportunities in the cities and elsewhere, the maintenance of the household registration system keeps most peasants confined to a lower caste position, subject to discrimination and mistreatment compared to registered residents of the locales to which they move.

These kinds of problems have produced an upsurge of protest movements across the face of rural China in the 1990s, some of them quite large in scale.[12] Given the fact that the CCP came to power on the basis of a rural revolution, again some analysts within China have seen peasant anger as a serious threat to the system. However, there are a number of reasons for skepticism about such analyses. First, whatever the modest weakening of the power of China's central authority in the reform era, conditions today are far different from those in the 1920s and 1930s, mak-

ing the establishment of a rural "base area" of protest against the CCP seem quite unlikely. As with regions and provinces, it also seems quite doubtful that rural residents identify strongly with other peasants and feel hatred for urbanites *in general*. Most rural protests seem concerned with much more parochial violations of expected treatment of residents of particular locales due to the actions of local officials at one level or another. To date the authorities have been able, through a combination of concessions and coercion, to prevent such local contentiousness from translating into broader rural protest movements.[13] China's rural residents may not be Marx's "sackful of potatoes," and their growing sophistication and knowledge of the system in which they live makes them increasingly vigorous defenders of their rights, rather than passive tools of their leaders.[14] However, there is little reason to think that recurring protest activity at the grass roots in rural China cannot be dealt with at that level without escalating into a regime-threatening protest movement.

The Floating Population: China's reforms have loosened the feudalistic bonds that tied China's rural residents to their villages, and as a result large numbers of migrants have flooded into China's cities. At any one time it is estimated that there are 80–100 million such members of the "floating population," and favored cities are awash in the resulting human tide. A recent count in Peking, for instance, led to an estimate that that city contained 3 million "floaters" in addition to its roughly 12 million regular urban residents.[15] Many "floaters" manage to find short- or longer-term jobs, but even so they retain the stigma of their rural registration, ineligible for many of the benefits that urbanites receive, and they are often feared and looked down upon by the city's permanent residents.[16] Their marginal connection to the urban system is often seen as making them less likely to play by the official rules, and they are often blamed for the upsurge in serious crimes in cities in recent years.

However, in this case as well there are reasons to doubt that China's floating population will become a serious threat to the system. This doubt is informed by research on squatters and migrants in other developing countries. Fears of migrants as a source of social and political disorder are common, but instances in which they mobilize to challenge the state are extremely rare. Generally speaking, migrants lack many of the structural conditions mentioned above that might translate their resentments into an effective political movement. They come voluntarily in pursuit of advantages and generally stay only when they are successful in this pursuit; their frame of reference tends to be kinsmen back in their vil-

lage rather than favored urban residents or fellow migrants; they often live dispersed among others with whom they are in competition; they lack the social space, resources, and leaders to effectively mobilize; and so forth. All of these considerations make it seem likely that China's urban migrants are more a source of stability than of instability.[17]

SOE Workers, Laid-Off Workers, and Pensioners: It is common to observe that, even though China's proletarians were never the "masters of the state" that Marxism proclaimed, within the bureaucratic structure of Mao-era China they were fairly well treated. They generally had relative incomes, job security, and fringe benefit coverage that workers in other developing countries could only envy. It is also widely recognized that these advantages have been a primary target of China's reforms, particularly in the 1990s. With large proportions of SOEs operating at a loss and under great pressure to cut costs and downsize, millions of long-time SOE employees have been laid off. Even those who remain at work are often subject to an increasingly draconian industrial regime of rules, fines, and close supervision reminiscent of "scientific management" in early capitalism in the West.[18] Furthermore, many of the subsidies and benefits that they formerly received have been weakened or eliminated, forcing them to pay much more of the cost of housing, medical care, schooling, and other necessities than in the past. Some hard-pressed firms are not able to meet their payrolls or pay the pensions of their retirees, actions that often spawn protests by workers and pensioners, who consider that long-standing commitments are being violated. As present and former SOE workers see the benefits they enjoyed under socialism being whittled away, all around them they can see new beneficiaries of the reforms—for example, private entrepreneurs, foreigners, rural migrants, and a "new class" of officials-turned-business executives. Given these trends it is understandable that worker protests have escalated in recent years, and that fear of worker protests is often seen as a primary obstacle to a more thorough reform of the SOE system.

In this instance the potential for serious challenges from China's SOE workers cannot be dismissed out of hand. There are several structural features of the workers' situation that are conducive to mobilization of worker protest movements. For example, SOE workers remain highly concentrated in relatively large units that long operated as highly integrated "urban villages." The potential for solidarity and sharing of grievances within this sort of structure seems particularly high. The potential for leaders of organized protests to emerge among people who have

lived and worked alongside each other for decades also seems considerable. Anger over promises not kept, benefits withdrawn, and jobs lost seems likely to be more politically dangerous than the sort of envy at the more rapid improvement enjoyed by others that is characteristic of many other groups in China today. Furthermore, in this case the tendency to blame the state as the initiator of SOE reforms, rather than oneself, rivals, or local managers, seems relatively great.

However, as of the end of the 1990s large scale layoffs and other problems of SOE workers had not been converted into serious challenges to state authority, and it is reasonable to ask why not. Several other features of the situation of workers seem to counterbalance the tendencies just enumerated, and thus to preserve the status quo. First, the writing has been on the wall for SOE workers since the mid-1980s, so that the loss of their privileges does not come as a shock. Their looming difficulties presumably induced many ambitious and dissatisfied SOE workers to find new employment elsewhere, whether directly from their SOE jobs or after having been laid off. The existence of this "exit" option makes life within an SOE less onerous than in the Mao era, and the selective nature of the exit flow probably acts to insure that those who remain tend to be individuals who are relatively grateful for retaining their dented iron rice bowls and concerned about how they will fare if they lose the remaining pay and benefits. In other words, it seems likely that individuals who are potential militants for workers rights are also more likely than others to leave in pursuit of better opportunities elsewhere.

The fact that most SOE downsizing has taken the form of layoffs rather than outright terminations is also a factor. Those who are laid off continue to receive some pay and often remain in unit-supplied housing as well, benefits that they may fear losing if they rock the boat. The fact that at least until recently China's buoyant economy has provided new job opportunities for many of those laid off, sometimes without jeopardizing the subsistence pay and benefits they receive from their SOE former employer, again seems likely to reduce the potential for worker unrest to escalate into serious challenges. We must also take into account the regime's extraordinary vigilance against any sign of autonomous organizing among workers to advance proletarian claims. The paranoia of China's leaders about the dangers of a Polish-style "Chinese Solidarity" movement makes any effort to mount a worker challenge against the state extraordinarily risky.

Another stabilizing factor is that to date most worker protests seem to have been directed at immediate managements and sometimes at local officials as well, and not upward against the central leadership. There are a variety of possible reasons for this myopic state of affairs.[19] In part what may be operating is a perception that higher levels of the state, while ultimately the inspiration of the reforms that are whittling away worker rights and benefits, are paradoxically also the main source of potential protection against overly aggressive or arbitrary SOE managements. In other words, when a reformist manager implements a threatening new practice that workers want to challenge, their primary recourse is to do such things as stage a sit-in outside local or higher government offices to demand that their grievances be heard. One common response to such protests is for besieged officials to pressure the SOE managers involved to work out concessions in order to restore order, with the state perhaps providing new funding to facilitate such concessions. To the extent that this process recurs, the state may be able to burnish its image as a protector of worker rights, rather than as the ogre who pulled the rug out from under the workers.[20]

A final consideration is that many SOE workers and pensioners may accept the justifications the regime provides for its reforms. China's proletarians are only too aware of how inefficient and unproductive SOEs were in the late-Mao era. Even if they resent the threats the reforms pose to their own livelihoods and work habits, they may nonetheless accept the state's claim that radical SOE reform is necessary in order for China to compete economically. If the legitimacy of such claims is accepted, then worker anger will be directed at those who are seen as unfairly implementing the reforms, not at the central state which launched them. To the extent that this is the case, worker anger as a result of SOE reforms is not likely to translate into a serious challenge to the state.

Alienated Students and Intellectuals: Students and intellectuals have been leading participants in the major demonstrations and crises that have shaken post-1949 China, ranging from the 100 Flowers Campaign of 1956–57 to the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989. Student protest activity of course has a much longer history in modern China.[21] It is also a commonplace of research on mass movements elsewhere (as well as of Marxist theory) that other groups in society rarely mobilize beyond parochial concerns unless allied with or led by students and intellectuals. For a variety of reasons, then, it is logical to look to China's intellectual elite when contemplating the prospects for stability or chaos in that society.

There are a variety of considerations that are likely to sustain high levels of alienation among China's students and intellectuals. Although some of the major criticisms of the regime raised in 1989 were not so important a decade later—inflation, for example (deflation was more of a danger)—others continue to generate discontent. Corruption continues to be pervasive, with the official campaigns launched against this evil considered highly selective and ineffective. The shopworn socialist slogans and rituals that the regime tries to use to legitimize its programs are widely rejected, and the absence of an alternative moral vision is particularly troubling to the inheritors of China's *literati* tradition. There is also the legacy of the events of 1989, which convinced some members of China's intellectual elite that the regime was so repugnant that it could not be reformed.

Although these considerations indicate that a reservoir of alienation among many students and intellectuals will remain a threat to China's leadership in the years ahead, other developments may make another large scale student uprising less likely. Several features of student life have changed in ways that may reduce the potential for student activism somewhat. University enrollments have expanded substantially in the last decade, a trend that may dilute the likelihood of college students seeing themselves as a deserving elite. The system of bureaucratic assignment to jobs after graduation, which still dominated in 1989 despite official promotion of individual competition for employment opportunities, has for the most part collapsed. Thus students are likely to feel that now they have much more control over their own professional futures, and are less subject to the arbitrariness and favoritism of university bureaucrats. In addition, the authorities are much more vigilant and even paranoid in trying to nip in the bud any early signs of revived campus activism. Regular threats and the annual spring "lockdown" of Beijing area campuses indicate that any future student-led demonstrations will have much more difficulty building up the kind of momentum and support that they received in 1989. The sense of partial immunity to potential regime coercion that helped embolden student protestors in 1989 also is no longer present.

In regard to intellectuals in general, both official policies and economic trends have to a considerable degree altered the situation of the late-1980s, when the rewards of the reforms seemed to be passing them by. Both state-sponsored wage increases for intellectuals and the rapid growth of new high technology employment opportunities in the 1990s

have substantially eliminated the situation in which returns to education were abnormally low in late Mao-era and early reform-era PRC.[22] Now once again China's knowledge workers can have some confidence that excelling in school and at work will lead to economic as well as spiritual rewards. Insofar as the hypocrisy of the gap between meritocratic slogans and China's residual bureaucratic/virtuocratic reality was a factor in student and intellectual anger in 1989, this should be less of a factor in the future. In sum, while past history makes it dangerous to discount the potential for a student-led mass movement in the future, on balance this potential source of regime instability also appears somewhat more manageable than in the past.

Alternative faiths and sects: The discussion to this point has focused on a fairly conventional set of potentially aggrieved social groups and has involved a sociological analysis of the forces likely to promote or counteract the tendency of these groups to mobilize to redress grievances. The challenge presented to the regime in 1999 by *Falun Gong* alerts us to the need to consider alternative sources of challenge to regime stability.[23] Although we do not yet have very much research on the membership and organization of this *Qigong* sect, its reported millions of members span regions and social groups, rather than representing a well defined social constituency.[24] There appears to be a tendency for the members to be middle-aged or older and to represent a variety of occupations in urban areas (including party cadres) more than rural China, but still it is the absence of a common social origin that is notable. The sect's members are united not by common social origins, but by their mode of response to China's current moral vacuum. They have found new meaning and moral guidance in an eclectic mixture of *Qigong* rituals and Buddhist and Daoist practices devised by sect founder Li Hongzhi, and in the discipline and solidarity they find among fellow believers in this new (but in some ways very old) faith.

There are several good reasons for China's leaders to be concerned about the challenge posed by *Falun Gong*. They were taken completely by surprise by the 10,000 or so highly disciplined *Falun Gong* members who staged a sit-in outside Zhongnanhai in April 1999. They were presumably very dismayed to discover that their long-standing and vigorous efforts to prevent the formation of any autonomous organizations in China had failed to halt the rise of a movement claiming millions of members nationwide. The awareness that state restrictions on the Internet did not prevent this sect from using new communications technologies

to mobilize members to confront the authorities must be particularly worrisome. Knowledge of the key role played by alternative faiths and charismatic leaders in movements that shook or overthrew earlier Chinese dynasties (Li Hongzhi as Hong Xiuquan?) must compound these worries. The dispersed and diverse nature of the membership and the apparent strength of their alternative beliefs seem to make them immune to the kinds of carrots and sticks the regime uses to deal with dissatisfied workers, peasants, or students.

Despite these ominous indicators, there are reasons to question how much of a threat to regime stability this movement can or will pose. Its leader is living in exile in New York, and even with the aid of the Internet, it is not clear how well the movement can respond to regime coercion without its charismatic leader on site to lead the charge. The main thrust of *Falun Gong* activities seems to revolve around personal salvation rather than alternative social and political programs for China. Thus members may "tune out" the political and commercial messages of the society around them without challenging them directly (although that could change as a result of the official suppression campaign). There were no signs as of 1999 that *Falun Gong* had tried to link up with aggrieved peasants, workers, or other groups, a development that would make them much more threatening. Although the movement is very large, at the same time it is also basically a sectarian movement in which you have to believe in order to join and participate. This factor cuts off large and influential parts of China's population, including many young people, Westernized intellectuals, and even supporters of rival *Qigong* masters. In short, the regime seems to have overreacted in claiming that *Falun Gong* represents a serious political threat to the system. Nonetheless, the continuing moral vacuum produced by the collapse of beliefs in Marxism and socialism provides fertile ground for new faiths to arise in China, and if such faiths develop political and social agendas and embed themselves in aggrieved social groups, they could pose serious challenges to the regime.

Conclusions

This survey of potential threats to system stability in China is obviously not exhaustive. One can think of a number of other possible sources of instability—for example, from a military angry about its loss of status and forced divestiture of lucrative business assets, or from diehard Marxist

intellectuals attempting to appeal to workers and peasants. Given our inability to anticipate the events of 1989 and the rise of *Falun Gong*, the possibility of new and unforeseen groups and movements mounting a challenge to China's leaders cannot be discounted. However, given this major caveat, the analysis presented here suggests several primary conclusions.

- We can expect a high level of contentiousness and conflict to persist in China in the future, with the regime unable to take the support of large portions of the population for granted.
- The remaining weaknesses of the institutional mechanisms for dealing with popular grievances and mobilized discontent are likely to produce crude and coercive regime responses in some instances, leading to continuing human rights abuses.
- Despite this turbulence, there is no particular group or grievance that appears very likely to pose a fundamental challenge to the leadership in the next few years. If this conclusion is correct, the same kind of muddling through and putting out local "forest fires" erupting from society that has characterized the last few years may continue. In other words, stability of a sort is a reasonable possibility.
- However, stability seems an odd and quite inappropriate term to use for the scenario envisioned here. Terms such as "rocky stability" or "stable unrest" seem closer to the mark.[25] In retrospect, casting the discussion in terms of "stability" versus "chaos" seems misleading and simplistic. One might better conceive of a continuum ranging from a very orderly stability to a revolutionary challenge to the regime. On such a continuum, the analysis here suggests, the most likely prospect for the immediate future is closer to the "chaos" end of the scale, with a variety of kinds of popular turmoil repeatedly testing but not necessarily defeating the leadership's ability to maintain control.
- For the present "rocky stability" to persist depends upon several conditions that, as others have observed, may be difficult to preserve. Economic conditions must continue to generate many new opportunities and jobs without producing spiraling inflation; the leadership must maintain internal unity and avoid splits over how to deal with social eruptions; they must try to ensure that local protests are dealt with quickly and effectively without escalating and allowing alliances to be formed with other aggrieved groups;

and the elite must be willing and able to use substantial coercion to quell protests that escape such initial control efforts.[26]

- Should these conditions not persist, the level of contentiousness and alienation present in Chinese society is such that future social disturbances could escalate into regime-threatening movements. In other words, even though what I have called "rocky stability" appears most likely under present circumstances, in years ahead a movement further down the continuum toward "chaos" is by no means a remote possibility.

- If the present analysis is accurate, the challenges for U.S. policy are considerable. While we have a strong interest in China's stability, the ways in which this stability is maintained are likely to include measures that we find highly unpalatable. Although we may be able to provide some forms of assistance that will lessen the chances of social instability—such as through fostering continued legal reform and further development of institutional mechanisms for expressing and resolving grievances—our actions generally will be quite peripheral to the sorts of social dynamics dealt with here. The United States will also continue to face the dilemma of how much support and face to provide to leaders who, however vital they may be to avoiding chaos, represent an outmoded and failed social movement of an earlier era.

Notes

1. For an informative journalistic version of the "chaos" viewpoint, see James Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen: China in Disarray*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

2. See the discussion in my book *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

3. These comments are inspired by the framework for analyzing subordinate orientations and actions introduced by Albert Hirschman in his book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972. That scheme helped inspire a number of studies of organized dependency in Mao-era China. See, in particular, Gail Henderson and Myron Cohen, *A Chinese Hospital*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984; Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

4. One clear exception to this generalization is in the realm of family planning. See my article, "Human Rights Trends and Coercive Family Planning in the PRC," *Issues and Studies*, 1998, 34: 1–29.

5. Obviously not everything has changed. The CCP still clings to its exclusive role at the center of the political system and tries to prevent any autonomous orga-

nizations from emerging and becoming influential. Furthermore, there are clearly limits to what kinds of political views can be expressed and how, with individuals and groups which go beyond those limits getting into serious political trouble. However, on balance the boundaries of tolerated attitudes and expression have widened considerably since Mao's death.

6. See Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, London: Tavistock, 1979.

7. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

8. The social science literature on the preconditions for regime-threatening mass movements is extensive. See, for example, Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. For an analysis applied to the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, see Andrew Walder, "The Political Sociology of the Beijing Upheaval of 1989," *Problems of Communism*, 1989, 38: 30–40. See also Dingxin Zhao, "Ecologies of Social Movements: Student Mobilization during the 1989 Prodemocracy Movement in Beijing," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1998, 103: 1493–1529.

9. Ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang, however, could under some circumstances escalate into a serious movement in favor of secession in these regions. If China's leaders were unable to successfully quell such a challenge and lost control of either of these provinces, that loss might precipitate serious challenges to the leaders from their colleagues on nationalistic grounds. In other words, it is possible that ethnic secession threats, while not generally endemic in China and not inherently a threat to the rest of the system even in the cases of Tibet and Xinjiang, could if successful produce the potential for a more thoroughgoing threat to the regime.

10. By the same general reasoning, it is not clear that rising inequalities in China generally will provide a major impetus for social discontent and political challenges (a specter raised in the recent, controversial book by He Qinglian, *The Pitfalls of China's Modernization*). Although we lack systematic research on Chinese popular beliefs about inequality and distributive justice issues, it seems likely that as in other societies, it is not so much the size of inequalities but perceptions of the predominance of illegitimate and corrupt means of getting ahead that generate most popular anger. And such anger is likely to be focused on specific groups that are seen as unfairly benefiting or causing such unfair benefits, rather than at inequalities in general.

11. On the size of the rural-urban income gap, see my article, "City versus Countryside in China's Development, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 1996, 43:9–22; see also Azizur Khan and Carl Riskin, "Income and Inequality in China: Composition, Distribution, and Growth of Household Income, 1988 to 1995," *China Quarterly*, 1998, 154: 221–53.

12. The best-known example is the popular protests in Renshou County in Sichuan Province in 1993. See the discussion in Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, pp. 169–73; see also Thomas Bernstein's essay in this volume.

13. In some cases, such as in the Renshou demonstrations, several townships within one county have mobilized together, and in others demonstrations have erupted in several nearby counties over the course of several weeks. See the discussion in

Thomas Bernstein's essay in this volume. However, peasant mobilizations into a movement spanning several counties seems to have been avoided so far.

14. See Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," *Modern China*, 1996, 22: 28–61.

15. Hao Hongsheng, personal communication to the author, June 1999, concerning a Beijing floating population census conducted in 1997.

16. See the works on China's migrants by Dorothy Solinger, particularly her recent book, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

17. See also the discussion in Dorothy Solinger, "China's Transients and the State: A Form of Civil Society? Hong Kong: Institute of Asian-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1991.

18. See my essay, "The Changing Role of Workers," in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds., *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. On the stricter labor regime, see the discussion in Minghua Zhao and Theo Nichols, "Management Control of Labour in State-Owned Enterprises: Cases from the Textile Industry," *China Journal*, 1996, 36: 1–24; Wenfang Tang and William Parish, *Chinese Urban Life Under Reform: The Changing Social Contract*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, Chapter 6.

19. Many of the most angry worker protests have been outside of the SOE sector, particularly in the sweatshop enterprises financed by Overseas Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean capital. In such cases abuses of workers, avoidable industrial accidents, and other causes of protests understandably are directed at what are perceived to be their source, local managers and owners, rather than the central state.

20. This conclusion is similar to that reached by Dorothy Solinger in her essay in this volume.

21. See the discussion in Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth Century China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991; and in his essay, "Student Protests and the Chinese Tradition, 1919–1989," in Tony Saich, ed., *The Chinese People's Movement*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990.

22. See the evidence presented in Tang and Parish, chapters 3–4.

23. *Falun Gong* is only one of the many examples of sects and would-be messiahs that have arisen in China during the reform period, although it may well be the largest. For another example, a messianic sect based in Hunan Province that claimed more than 10,000 followers in 1997, see Seth Faison, "Strategy for a Charlatan in China: Claim Deity, Then Steal and Seduce," *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1999, p. A5.

24. For a discussion of the revival of *Qigong* masters and followers in urban China since the 1980s, see Nancy Chen, "Urban Spaces and Experiences of *Qigong*," in D. Davis, R. Kraus, B. Naughton, and E. Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

25. The latter term is used in Steven Jackson in the "Conference Summary" of this volume.

26. It is worth noting that the unwillingness or inability of the new generations of East European leaders to resort to large scale coercion to put down growing protests in 1989 was a key factor in the collapse of their regimes. (When the one old generation leader involved, Ceausescu, proved willing, the troops wouldn't obey.)