Evolution State-Society Relations in China:
Introduction*

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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,”1 China has nevertheless emerged as a regional

* 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, 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.

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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. 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.

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. 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.

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” 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. This timely volume offers insights into the changing state-society dynamics and their implication for Chinese politics.

Notes


