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Structures and Agents: 
Key Issues in Contemporary China’s Social Transformation

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Introduction: Structure and Agency

There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
   — William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act IV, Scene III

Social changes can usually be categorized into three groups, viz. the economic, political and the cultural factors. Economic factors, especially the impacts of capitalism, form the core of the Marxist approach to social changes. Such emphasis on economic factors, whether for ideological reasons or for the need of power maintenance, still forms the basis of the Chinese Communist Party’s fundamental definition of human rights as the people’s rights to be fed, to be educated and to be employed. Nevertheless, straying from this orthodox tenet is the neo-Marxist expansion of sources of social contradictions, which are in social structures, to the political, religious, ethnic and ideological factors of and also the importance of culture not least as a marker for political tension. The cautious but pragmatic approach to reform, whether economic or political, of post-Mao and post-Deng China seems to reflect the neo-Marxist view that economic change is not inevitable and a stalemate or Reeler (2007)’s “stability” could be the preferred outcome of social conflicts – the stance of “stability will else” which reaffirms dominance maintained by gradualism in reform and social changes. Pluralized conflicts, one of the possible major patterns of conflicts, point of view of neo-Marxists, help in such maintenance of dominance, rized by the distinctive feature of “fragmentation and absence of a feeling of identity” of current Chinese extra-Party politics (Benton, 2010: 322), partly as a relentless crackdown on generalist dissent, which the CCP regime perceived threatening which has recently intriguingly escalated into a wider crackdown on Internet defenders and whistle blowers. In comparison with the different waves of a century of Chinese dissent, as pointed out by both Benton and Wasserstrom, dissent in China lacks a unifying thread that connects the actions of different groups (Wasserstrom, 2009), partly a result of the actions of the regime, so “a result of the increasing complexity, differentiation, and individualization of society, which is no longer monochrome and predictable but as diverse as other