INTRODUCTION

Reform, Governance and Sociopolitical Change in Contemporary China

In various ways this 2011 special issue of the *IJCS, Reform, Governance and Equity: Exploring the Sociopolitical Implications of Contemporary China’s Transformation*, represents a follow-up to the earlier, 2010 special issue *China in Transition: Social Change in the Age of Reform* which began the journal’s exploratory focus on indeed the most fundamental and critical issue in contemporary China’s astonishing transformation, especially if one takes social changes as to encompass both socioeconomic and sociopolitical transitions. As the contents of each of the papers collected in this special issue have been summarized in the respective abstracts, this introduction will not attempt to purvey the synopses of these articles but to contemplate each as part of the whole exploration on reform, governance and sociopolitical change within the context of a transforming China.

Professor David McMullen’s paper “Devolution in Chinese History: The Fengjian Debate Revisited” aptly begins the issue under the section *Historical Proem* by bringing us on a journey to the Kaiyuan Tianbao 開元天寶 period (years 713-756 of the Common Era) of medieval China’s Tang dynasty and various other periods in pre-modern China to critically examine the pre-modern debate on political or administrative devolution, contending that one of the main headings under which this long-running issue about the degree of centralization was discussed is the subject of *fengjian* 封建. Schneider (2003: 33) hypothesizes three core dimensions of the concept of decentralization: (1) fiscal decentralization referring to the extent of a central government’s ceding of fiscal impact to non-central government entities, (2) administrative decentralization referring to the extent of autonomy non-central government entities possess relative to central control, (3) political decentralization referring to how much a central government allows non-central government entities to undertake the political functions of governance such as representation, and while political decentralization has usually been observed to go hand in hand with democratization, McMullen urges caution against the over-simplistic argument that *fengjian* even in its final phase involved a demand for a sophisticated civil society at local levels free of
domination by the State, as the most that can be said about *fengjian* is its call for a localism free from excessive central government exploitation and control, a common theme that has in various ways permeated through the many articles selected for this special issue. Such is, under the section *Governance, Democracy and Decentralization*, when Professor Brantly Womack in his paper “Modernization and the Sino-Vietnamese Model”, which analyzes the distinctive model of political development in the contemporary “party-state survivors” of China and Vietnam and the challenges posed to modernization theory by the Sino-Vietnamese experience, talks about the increased local transparency and accountability and articulation of local interests while the Communist Party, being disillusioned with “socialist transformation” but still firmly in power, places its dogma “on a remote altar while [it] preserves and justifies itself by tending to the pastoral duties relating to the welfare of the flock”. Such is also when Professor Huang Weiping and Dr Chen Jiaxi in their paper “China’s Grassroots Democracy: Development and Assessment”, which studies the practice and logic of the evolution of grassroots democracy during the reform era, talk about the importance of “inborn democracy” (*neishengxing minzhu* 内生型民主), within the context of the development of grassroots democracy and inner party democracy, which includes villagers’ self-governance, independent participation in grassroots people’s congress elections, the property owners committee, and the people’s congress representative workstation, all having strong support from the public and are led by effective local opinion leaders yet facing restrictions from local authorities which fear social instability and the threat to the authority of the ruling party.

Such contradictions between the central State power and a growing civil society seeking greater autonomy free from the former’s tight control also constitute the subject matter of various papers under the section *Social Stratification, State and the Civil Society* which focus respectively on issues ranging from socioeconomic inequalities, interregional disparities, rural-urban divide, plight of social minorities and marginal communities as well as the conflict between the central State and the ethnoregional minorities struggling for greater autonomy and rights to ethnic identity preservation, socioeconomic protection and self-determination. Among these are Dr Qian Forrest Zhang’s paper “Rethinking the Rural-Urban Divide in China’s New Stratification Order” that attempts to re-evaluate the rural-urban divide while calling for a re-definition of the concept of “rurality” in a new market economy where household registration is no longer a barrier to rural-urban migration and where the “proletarianized urban workers who are exposed to the brute forces of markets” are even more worse off than the agricultural petty-commodity producers in the rural areas, and Dr Zhong Sheng’s “Towards China’s Urban-Rural Integration: Issues and Options” which looks at the challenges
of China’s CURD (Coordinated Urban-Rural Development/城乡统筹) reforms that have been conducted with various local ramifications. Within this context, recalling the localism that McMullen’s paper highlighted above, it is noteworthy that in recent years, local and international organizations around the world are increasingly advocating decentralization to bring about more effective poverty reduction and hence the narrowing of socioeconomic gap, with both the direct effects on the regional targeting of transfers and the indirect effects of overcoming the inefficiency in local public services and hampered economic growth related to sub-optimal decentralization (von Braun and Grote, 2000: 2) and this is particularly pertinent for China given the context of the ethnoregional dimension of the poverty problem. Although theoretically there may not be a clear-cut functioning relationship between decentralization and poverty reduction, most research findings in recent years definitely pointed to the positive. According to von Braun and Grote (2000), political, administrative and fiscal decentralizations need to be considered simultaneously, and the sequencing and pace of these three aspects of decentralization seem to play an important role in impacting poverty reduction. While fiscal decentralization shows ambivalent effects for poverty reduction and administrative decentralization alone does not add power and voice to the poor, “political decentralization often benefits the poor, because involving civil society in planning, monitoring and evaluating public programs and policies is crucial to ensure steady progress and that is facilitated in a decentralized system” (ibid.: 25-26), or, as Boex et al., referring to UNCHR’s statement “Poverty is local and it can only be fought at the local level” (UNCHR, 1999), pointed out in their research report “Fighting Poverty through Fiscal Decentralization” (January 2006: 2), “if the increasingly accepted wisdom that ‘all poverty is local’ is correct, then decentralization policy and poverty reduction strategies could be closely intertwined and have synergetic positive effects on each other”. Kyei (2000), in his study on the case of Ghana, concluded that the rural poor in Ghana could only benefit with a much stronger commitment from the central government to decentralization, especially in terms of powersharing and financial provision. Vijayanand (2001), in his paper on the Kerala state of India, noted various advantages of decentralization in terms of poverty reduction including the greater reach of resources with earmarking of funds for the disadvantaged groups, less sectoralism in decentralized programmes with greater convergence contributing to the reduction in the ratchet effect of poverty, greater emphasis on locally appropriate and affordable solutions, greater realism in tackling problems of poverty, improved accountability, etc. while decentralization “affords opportunities to the poor to grow in strength by continuous participation (learning by doing), constant observation of the exercise of power (learning by seeing) and accessing more information
(learning by knowing)” (p. 23). Hence, given the crucial ethno-regional dimension of China’s poverty problem, it is pertinent that the poverty alleviation effort of the country should benefit from any possible progress in decentralization – fiscal, administrative, and most importantly, political – since decentralized governments, due to their closeness both institutionally (e.g. ethnically) and spatially to citizens in the regional/rural areas, could be more responsive to the needs of the poor than the central government and hence are more likely to successfully formulate and implement pro-poor policies and programmes in these regions and areas.

As Dr Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh points out in his paper “Stratification, Social Action and Morphogenesis: Structures and Agents in Contemporary China’s Social Transformation”, the distribution of China’s poor is characterized by “four concentrations”: (1) concentration in the mountainous areas, (2) concentration in the western region, (3) concentration in environmentally fragile areas, and (4) concentration in ethnic minority areas, hence reflecting a composite phenomenon made up of rural poverty, geographical poverty, ethnic poverty and frontier poverty, which has undoubtedly been playing an important role in the recent years’ ethnic riots in the country’s frontier regions. The issue of Uyghur urban unemployment amidst Han influx is also pointed out in David O’Brien’s paper, “The Mountains Are High and the Emperor Is Far Away: An Examination of Ethnic Violence in Xinjiang”, which focuses on the devastating outbreak of violence in Xinjiang in July 2009, the role of the hard-line party secretary Wang Lequan and the central State’s strategy and policy towards this restive ethnic region. While worsening interethnic relations especially in view of the surging Han influx and the relative economic backwardness of the local ethnic communities and environmental degradation especially in the form of receding grassland due to mining and overgrazing have been blamed for the escalating ethnic regional disturbances, both O’Brien and Yeoh, nevertheless, emphasize the overall political structure and State policy towards dissent as the major contributing factors for the increasing volatility of the ethnic regions, as manifest in recent years’ troubles in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. In this regard, O’Brien has focused on the widening gap between the central State’s official policy for ethnic regions and ethnic minorities policy and what is actually happening on the ground – a gap similarly emphasized by Yeoh in the form of the inability of a regime to face the unfolding political realities while continuing to recycle the shopworn Leninist conspiracy theories that blame mass protests primarily on the Party’s foreign and domestic enemies, especially the foreign forces hostile to socialism bending on fostering a process of “peaceful evolution”, as highlighted by Womack, exemplified in recent years by the high-profile Charter 08 in China in 2008 and 2006’s “Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam”.
The 1989 Beijing-Tiananmen upheaval and tragedy, the purge of Zhao Ziyang and the obliteration of the one and only political reform package in the history of the Chinese Communist Party which attempted to introduce the most far-reaching political structural reforms such as the separation of power between Party and State, proposed by Zhao earlier at the 13th Party Congress in October 1987, undeniably formed the watershed that serves to define subsequent State-civil society interactions and the concomitant development in China’s political and socioeconomic structure, as well as central State-ethnic regional relations (Yeoh, 2010: 278-280). Continued survival of one-party rule became the paramount concern, as Yeoh highlights in this special issue, as the prime directive of “stability above all else” and the ruthless “dissent-harmonizing” maintenance of a “harmonious society” delineated a safe zone wherein political “seemers” are parading administrative innovations as political reforms and political fudge (zhengzhi huyou 政治忽悠) as visionary leadership. As Dr Jay Wysocki comments in his paper “Efficiency, Value and the 21st-Century Developmental State: The Transition of China”, which examines the origin and role of efficient industrialization as the vector of social change and how rapid industrialization confronts China with the social value for efficiency forcing accommodation by the society, the “capitalism of a different sort shapes a state of a different sort with non-transparent interest groups and decision making” facilitated internally by “strong” Asian Value which encourages a weak civil society, with a State sufficiently authoritarian to satisfy its élite. It is within such a setting that the modern-era Chinese Communist Party in a fast-transforming Chinese economy is itself being transformed, as pointed out in Dr Ngeow Chow Bing’s paper “Community Party Building in Urban China”, which analyzes the community party building programme in urban China in the transformation of the Chinese Communist Party from a “revolutionary party” to a “governing party” and the relationship between the party organization and local democratic development, by co-opting, integrating and monitoring the interests of all elements of the society which it ironically would not tolerate to form the basis of political pluralism, in a process of turning itself into a party that exhibits certain features of probably a so-called “catch-all” party. Meanwhile, having been disillusioned with the once-revolutionary vision of socialist transformation while still maintaining the monopoly of political power, as Womack observes, the Party now “attracts risk-avoiding careerists rather than risk-taking revolutionaries”. Such “post-revolutionary syndrome” may not only afflicts new recruits, as Yeoh observes, when instead of statesmen with conscience and prescience, holding the helm are but visionless, overcautious political careerists resplendent in hollow, sentimental rhetoric and showmanship, being both the products and survivors of the yesteryear of Maoist horror and still reeling from the shock of the perceived political
debacle of 1989. Meanwhile, as Émile Durkheim (1895) said, “The air does not cease to have weight, although we no longer feel that weight”, brewing social forces bringing along subliminal emergent changes continue to threaten to subvert the stability of well laid-out projectable changes envisaged by the ruling regime (Yeoh, 2010: 241-245), aided in no small measure by the advent of the Internet Age, as Dr Chin-fu Hung observes in his paper “The Politics of Electronic Social Capital and Public Sphere in Chinese Lala Community: Implications for Civil Society” which explores the politics of cyber-networks and cyber social bonds in the Chinese lesbian community as well as its wider implications for the Chinese civil society, and Professor Joseph Tse-Hei Lee notes in his review article in this volume, “Media and Dissent in China: A Review”. While Hung emphasizes that the Internet has effectively empowered individuals, including the marginalized and once-persecuted homosexual community, and the society as a whole “by diversifying newer sources of alternative/dissenting information and channels for civic association and engagement”, in the repressive, authoritarian China, Lee comments in his review that no authoritarian regime or leader, who not only rules by fear but also rules in fear, is capable of imposing absolute control without challenge and compromise amidst the current global electronic network transformation, as evident in the astounding “Jasmine Revolutions” that are sweeping the Arab world and reverberating in the nightmares of the Chinese leaders. Such is the impact of globalization.

In fact, comprising one fifth of humanity and having risen to be the world’s second largest economy in terms of gross domestic product, China’s economic and political development is today no longer solely a matter of her own domestic concern, but is increasingly acquiring new dimensions that have a powerful impact across her borders, as Professor Solomon Cohen notes in his paper “Leadership Displacement and the Redesign of Global Governance: The Race of China and India” which analyzes the unique catch-up trends of China and India in the context of leadership displacement in global governance, substantive redesigns of whose rules are deemed required given that the systemic differences in the case of China and India vis-à-vis the current firm-dominated leading countries such as US and EU are likely to accentuate externality problems at the global level. Returning to the issue of State-civil society relations within the context of such a globalizing world, Phoebe Luo Mingxuan, Dr John Donaldson and Dr Qian Forrest Zhang in their paper “The Transformation of China’s Agriculture System and Its Impact on Southeast Asia”, which examines the impacts on the poor and vulnerable Southeast Asian farmers from the investment of Chinese agribusinesses, note that the civil society may be able to fill the void left by the government in protecting the interests of poor farmers in the negotiations for better contractual terms with the investors, including those from China, though
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governments often resort to repress the NGOs, “fearing the creation of a public space that they cannot control”, as the political forces behind issues that on the surface seem to be voluntary exchanges should not be ignored. Such forces are at work too even in international sports events such as the Beijing Olympics of 2008, as pointed out by Professor Brian Bridges in his paper “Beyond The Olympics: Power, Change and Legacy” that begins the section Social Change, Power Configuration and Global Governance. Focusing on the expectations, immediate results and potential longer-term legacies of the Beijing Olympics, the paper has paid due attention to their use by the government both for domestic economic and political purposes and as an instrument of foreign relations. While noting the limitation of the success of the Beijing Olympics in extending China’s “soft power” and winning over the hearts of the Western public, Bridges also highlights the complexity of what Jeffrey Wasserstrom calls “transitology” – effectively the transitions away from one-party rule – by observing the lack of the intention on the part of the Chinese leaders, in contrast to the South Korean precedent, to use the sports mega-event to pave the way for democratization, citing the irony in the arrest in early 2011 of Ai Weiwei, one of the key designers of the iconic Bird’s Nest stadium for the Beijing Olympics.

As McMullen notes in his paper that begins this special issue, statism tended to overwhelm the discussion of political issues and hence eclipse the recognition of any incipient development of a civil society in the statecraft discourse of late imperial and Republican China, the analyses presented in the research papers collected in this volume have thus revealed the complex nexus involved in the arduous journey of sociopolitical transformation and development of State-civil society relations in the current Chinese context of reform and governance. This volume ends with Yongqiang Li, Professor Anona Armstrong and Professor Andrew Clarke’s policy comments and research notes “Governance of Small Businesses in China: An Institutional Perspective” and Professor Joseph Tse-Hei Lee’s book review article “Media and Dissent in China: A Review” that critically analyzes Johan Lagerkvist’s 2010 book After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society. As this is a special issue, an index is added to facilitate referencing.

Earlier versions of many of the papers in this special issue were presented at the international conference “Growth, Governance and Equity: Exploring the Social Implications of China’s Economic Transformation” organized by the Institute of China Studies (ICS), University of Malaya, in June 2011. The selected papers by McMullen (originally the keynote to the conference), Huang and Chen, Ngeow, Bridges, Wysocki, Zhang, Zhong, Hung, Yeoh, and Li, Armstrong and Clarke are new versions of their earlier papers presented at the said conference, duly revised by incorporating critical
peer feedback received at the conference and from other reviewers. The editor and the Institute of China Studies would like to thank these conference presenters who have taken great effort to revise their papers for inclusion in this special issue, and the other authors who have contributed some great new papers to this issue as well as the anonymous reviewers who have given invaluable assistance in providing critical comments on the earlier versions of these papers.

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