Introduction

Governance, Civil Societal Response and the Chinese State

With the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China concluded on 15th November 2012 and the birth of a new Politburo Standing Committee, the Party thus completed its second orderly hand-over of power in more than six decades of its rule over this most populous country in the world, and today, the world’s second largest economic entity. Nevertheless, also marking the year 2012 are various other poignant events that have further strained State-civil society relations in this vast country: the suicide of Zha Weilin, the mysterious death of Li Wangyang, the daring escape of Chen Guangcheng from captivity in Shandong, the intensification of public protests apparently emboldened by the encouraging solution to late 2011’s Siege of Wukan, and the continuing self-immolation of Tibetans since 2009. Among these, most undoubtedly epitomizing the contemporary sociopolitical dilemmas of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the proliferation of public protests mainly related to forced demolition and relocation, industrial pollution and official corruption, and related to this, State response to civil rights-defending weiquan activism and its treatment of such activists as part of the wider dissident community. The continued unfolding of this systemic crisis has, indeed, to be properly placed in the overall environmental context of the problem of increasingly acute socioeconomic inequality, including its ethnoregional dimension, which in many ways constitute the epitome as well as the root of China’s social ills resulted from her recent decades of continuous, astounding economic tour de force while having stagnated are the modernization and democratization of its political structure and sociopolitical power configuration. The deep-seatedness of such stagnation is conveyed to us in David McMullen’s opening article of this special issue, “Memorials and Essays: Political Protest in Late Medieval China”. While placing the Tang dynasty tradition of political criticism in its historical context as an aspect of the traditional administrative structure in China, McMullen has shown how besides established channels both for internalized dissent and for independently initiated protest at that time, provisions were developed for the emperor to be aware of dissenting views from the common people, though the paternalistic and largely symbolic nature of such channels should be noted.
While pointing out the deep historical and ideological roots of remonstration and the principle of open access to the throne of the Tang period, McMullen also highlights the later developments in State response to political dissent in post-Song China which were often characterized by far harsher imperial dynastic intolerance of dissenting views, along with increasing despotism. From the gruesome suppression of the Donglin movement to the imperial courts’ co-opting the Confucian literati while continuing to monitor and police the intellectual community by codifying the learned tradition, such later developments would not fail to evoke a sense of déjá vu for reader of papers in this special issue subsequent to this historical proemium.

Moving from the historical perspective of the preceding paper to the contemporary era, Merle Goldman in her article, “Citizens’ Struggles in China’s Post-Mao Era”, traces the development of intellectual dissent in modern China, beginning with a look at Mao Zedong’s totalitarian rule before proceeding to the post-Mao authoritarian decades. Goldman’s paper, moving through the Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administrations, brings into focus the ebb and flow of the plight of dissidents, the uneasy co-existence of pluralistic discourse and openness to foreign ideas and continued tight surveillance and purges and persecution of dissenting intellectuals, including Liu Xiaobo, the key founder of Charter 08. Nevertheless, Goldman notes that while persecution of dissident public intellectuals continues even after the country’s transition from a totalitarian to an authoritarian polity, the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is today admittedly less repressive than during the Mao era, and together with China’s increasing participation in the international community, making it possible for intellectuals to speak out periodically and publicly on political issues, with an impact beyond their immediate intellectual circles. Continuing the discussion on contemporary Chinese dissent and political repression is Arif Dirlik and Roxann Prazniak’s paper, “Social Justice, Democracy and the Politics of Development: The People’s Republic of China in Global Perspective”, which provides a critical analysis of the subject in a global context, urging for the need to see China’s problems as the world’s problems, and vice versa, the world’s problems as China’s too. From outsider’s complicity based on market and related considerations of economic gain1 to their tacit condoning of political repression stemming from their enthusiasm for the authoritarian “China model” wherein domestic plunder and exploitation could ironically be good for business for the transnational corporations, Dirlik and Prazniak provide a scathing evaluation of the phenomenon and root causes of contemporary Chinese political repression in a global context which is of utmost importance in searching for solutions that would go right to the core of the systemic sources far beyond mere surface phenomena.
Such linkages between the external and the internal in understanding Chinese dissent and State-civil society relations also constitute the focus of Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s article, “Learning from Chinese National and Nationalist Spectacles”. Juxtaposing the two ostensibly contrasting spectacles of the anti-Japanese protests that erupted in mid-2012 and the lavish gala held to open the Beijing Olympic Games on 8th August 2008, and carefully unveiling the role and aim of the Party-State in overseeing and orchestrating such spectacles, the role of the participants, comments of domestic intellectuals and the international responses, Wasserstrom argues against accepting the idea of a single unified Chinese worldview put forward by the Chinese government and occasionally also by foreign commentators. It is interesting also to compare such State-orchestrated, or partly State-orchestrated, spectacles with the large-scale spontaneous gatherings of the masses such as the proliferating “mass incidents” across the Chinese provinces, and 2012’s consecutive gatherings and demonstrations in Hong Kong against the CCP regime’s encroachment into the enclave’s political and civil liberty and its introduction of “brain-washing” curriculum into the Special Administrative Zone (SAR)’s education institutional framework. The most impressive gathering of all has to be the commemoration gathering upon the 23rd anniversary of June Fourth that was held in Victoria Park, attended by the largest number ever of 180,000 people, whose poignant image of over a hundred thousand candles burning in vigil of those slain in the brutal repression two decades ago makes the cover of this special issue.

In comparison with the victims of State repression in June 1989, whether slain on the Chang’an Avenue, or languished in jail like Li Wangyang, or forced into exile like the many students, academics and labour activists, today’s weiquan (rights-defending) activists on the other hand represent a community who are trying to work within PRC’s politico-legal system to defend the civil rights of the downtrodden masses and victims of official corruption and abuse of power and a mode of development obnoxiously tainted by guan-shang goujie (State-business collusion). At the forefront of this new breed of dissidents are the weiquan lüshi (rights defence lawyers) who top the list of subversive forces highlighted in a recent article in the overseas edition of the Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), and who form the focus of Feng Chongyi, Colin Hawes and Gu Ming’s paper, “Rights Defence Lawyers as Dissidents in Contemporary China”. Against the backdrop of China’s economic, social and political transition, Feng, Hawes and Gu explore the emergence of these “rights defence lawyers”, with emphasis on the politically charged environment for China’s legal profession, how these rights defence lawyers could turn into political dissidents when defending clients whose rights are violated by the Party-State, and their quest for the rule of law and democratic political reforms through their interaction with the
wider weiquan activism. Indeed, for the powerless, the dispossessed masses at the lower stratum of society, who have no effective channel to have their grievances redressed by voicing out, these rights defence lawyers emerge to be the main people to whom they could possibly turn for help – who, such as Chen Guangcheng, ironically often become themselves the target of State persecution as they take up cases of victims of State action or of State-business collusion – other than resorting to the currently proliferating street protests, euphemistically called “mass incidents” in official parlance.

On the issue of such “mass incidents”, some months prior to the momentous record gathering at Victoria Park’s June Fourth commemoration, about a hundred and twenty kilometers east of the border of Hong Kong, a protest that started in September 2011 in a tiny fishing village in China’s Guangdong Province soon developed virtually into a local rebellion by December which led to the “Siege of Wukan” that both shocked and fascinated the world. Johan Lagerkvist’s paper, “The Wukan Uprising and Chinese State-Society Relations: Toward ‘Shadow Civil Society’?”, looks into the Wukan incident to reflect on the wider issue of social protest mobilization in the Chinese countryside and the emerging civil society, while pondering the interesting questions related to the uniqueness of the Wukan phenomenon and whether the rather unique and truly remarkable solution to the Wukan crisis does have a symbolic or concrete significance for propelling the progress of democratic politics in China. Despite its unique resolution, the Wukan “uprising” is but one of the myriad cases of “mass incidents” occurring in China at an alarming frequency and intensity which can only be understood by taking into consideration all critical issues underlying contemporary China’s social transition, such as poverty, inequality and social stratification, ethnoregional disparities and contradictions, within the overall political milieu where social change is moving apace amidst astounding economic transformation. Ironically, some factors which at first look seem to be system-threatening may instead work for the ruling regime’s advantage. Some see, for instance, social protests in today’s China as constituting one of the major components of social stability, as the protests serve as checks against the leaders’ abuse of power and as mechanisms ensuring the accountability of the government, thereby undergirding rather than undermining the political system in China’s authoritarian polity where multi-party competitive elections do not exist to provide an effective check on the misbehaviour of State authorities, while others consider large-scale mass incidents driven by economic grievances attributable to local officials’ wrongdoing, or the lack of proper regulations or experience in handling problems engendered by the process of socioeconomic transformation, as not regime-threatening because by asking the government to zuozhu (enforce justice), the protests had in fact endorsed the legitimacy of the regime, and as long as the regime had plenty of
financial resources to satisfy the protesters’ demands – hence the significance of GDPism as a cornerstone of regime maintenance – it further consolidates its legitimacy.2

Continuing the exploration of State-civil society relations and the situation of dissent in China are Chin-fu Hung’s paper, “China’s Changing State-Society Relations in the Internet Age: Case Study of Zhao Zuohai”, examining the country’s legal/political transition with particular focus on its digital technologies-facilitated dimension, and Jonathan Benney’s “How to Avoid the Centre: The Strategies of a Small Feminist Workshop in Rural China” which looks into the possibility of developing activist strategies in China which could “avoid the centre”, other than the activist organizations’ usual strategy of partial appeasement of the Party-State to deal with the spectre of State intervention. While Hung analyzes the implications of the digital technologies-facilitated legal/political transition for China’s newly emerging State-society relations in this age of the Internet with the “wrongful conviction” case (yuan’an/cuo’an) of Zhao Zuohai as supporting evidence, Benney analyzes, with the case study of a “women’s workshop” in rural Guangxi, the strategies used by the workshop’s “glocalised” networks of activists to be both offensive and defensive, and to be vocal yet at the same time not attracting immediate official opprobrium. Activist strategy also represents one of the major foci of Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh’s paper, “State and Dissent: Structure and Agency in the Development of Contemporary Chinese NVA”, which explores the arduous development and current situation of contemporary Chinese nonviolent action (NVA) movements. Seeing contemporary Chinese NVA not as a multiattribute concept, but a multiconcept construct covering a spectrum of civil actions with different ideological and strategic orientations, Yeoh analyzes the Chinese State-civil society relations with particular emphasis along the pathway of a State domination-NVA assertion nexus with due attention paid to its macro-micro linkages in particular from the interpretive perspective, taking into consideration the problem of structure and agency and taking cognizance of the central role played by individual political actors in giving existence to the system, and the inability for the causal powers of systems and structures to exist without the mediation through the Archerian human agency whose causal powers, in turn, are indeducible from or irreducible to the causal powers of society. This pivotal role of the human agency also forms the focus of James W. Tong’s review of the book by Ching Cheong published in early 2012, whose Chinese title3 means A Thousand Days without Regrets – My Spiritual Journey. Describing it as a tour de force on Ching’s personal traumatic detention and imprisonment and an account with “the inquisitive breadth of a veteran investigative reporter, and the introspective and analytical depth of a soul-searching intellectual”, Tong finds the book also a treasure trove reflecting
on the human rights conditions in today’s China and an informative resource on the country’s criminal statutes and procedures, prison life and treatment of detainees. Finally, closing this special issue of the *International Journal of China Studies* is Wong Kok Keong’s review of the book *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism* (2010). This December 2012 issue of *IJCS* is slightly longer than a usual issue for, as a special thematic issue, more leeway has been given to the papers in terms of length, paying heed to Aldous Huxley’s concern that sometimes brevity might not do justice to all the facts of a complex situation.

Before ending this introduction, I would like to thank Miss Susie Yieng-Ping Ling, editorial manager of the journal, for her impeccable administrative help in making the publication of this 2012 special issue *State, Governance and Civil Societal Response in Contemporary China: Critical Issues in the 21st Century* on time possible. I am also grateful to Mr Lionel Wei-Li Liong for his assistance in copy-editing and proof-reading and technical help in cover design, and to Mr Ivan Foo Ah Hiang for his excellent typesetting. The responsibility for any errors and inadequacies that remain is of course fully mine.

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**Notes**

1. Including the acceptance of the Confucius Institutes (“where behind the façade of the Hanban the Wizard of OZ resides in the Central Propaganda Department”) in the name of closer cultural relations. Such concern over educational institutions serving willingly as vehicles for State-guided propaganda of a regime paranoiacally suspicious of free critical inquiry beyond its control could indeed be grave for their potential influence on the outlook and orientation of the human agency for, as noted elsewhere in this volume, “language teaching and learning is never purely about language, for it inevitably embodies the inculcation of not only cultural values but subliminal political brainwashing through textbooks (including what is omitted in them) and ‘cultural immersion programmes’” (p. 502, note 62).


3. The book’s colophon title in English is *My 1000-day Ordeal – A Spiritual Journey*.

4. “The soul of wit may become the very body of untruth. However elegant and memorable, brevity can never, in the nature of things, do justice to all the facts of a complex situation. On such a theme one can be brief only by omission and simplification. Omission and simplification help us to understand – but help us, in many cases, to understand the wrong thing; for our comprehension may be only of the abbreviator’s neatly formulated notions, not of the vast, ramifying reality from which these notions have been so arbitrarily abstracted.” (Aldous Huxley’s “Foreword” to his *Brave New World Revisited*, Chatto & Windus Ltd, London, 1959, re-published by Grafton Books, London, 1983)