



## Social Inequality and Conflict beyond Class: Developments in Contemporary China

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### Abstract

In order to understand the nexus between inequalities, conflict and change in contemporary China, social inequalities should be seen broadly (i.e. include both hierarchy and exclusion), and perceived from social actors' perspective: as those aspects of social hierarchy and division/exclusion which are problematic because they violate the popular sense of justice. This is in line with the theoretical perspective derived from the works of Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber. According to this perspective, social resentments and antagonisms increase at the time of the economic downturn, especially when this downturn follows the long period of growth, increasing affluence and rising expectations. The most politically consequential aspects of social inequalities in modernizing societies are privileges, discriminations and exclusions; hierarchies of income and authority, by contrast, are typically effectively legitimated by elites. However, the key factor of social stability is the effective management of social inequalities by political elites. Given the effective elite management of inequalities, mass egalitarian mobilizations in China are unlikely. This does not break the nexus between social inequality, conflict and change, but adds an intermediate – and crucial – variable of 'elite management.

**Keywords:** Inequality, China, Conflict, Elite, Class

### 1. Social Inequality and Conflict beyond Class (Note 1)

The financial and economic crisis, while triggered in the West, strongly affects China. The current downturn slows down the economic growth, increases unemployment, and undermines economic security of large sections of industrial workers, especially migrants from rural areas. More significantly, the slowdown follows a long period of a very rapid growth and the accompanying increase in social aspirations and expectations. When prosperity and security (often interpreted in China as 'sufficiency') are threatened, so is the underlying 'compact' between the rulers and the ruled – and this causes widespread concerns. It is feared that the economic 'disparities' (in income, wealth and overall lifechances) that have widened during the period of rapid growth, are likely to widen further at the 'lower end' of the scale, where rising unemployment is likely to increase poverty, especially in rural areas. This is seen as the key sources of class-type antagonism, fuelled by egalitarian resentments and aspirations, aiming at redistributive levelling, and directed against the central and local elites. The crisis, in other words, is seen as a possible trigger for social unrest, and class-type protest mobilisation. (e.g., Bajoria 2008)

Such a scenario, as argued here, is unlikely, because the theoretical perspective on which it rests – derived mainly from the Marxist perspective – is inadequate, and because the alternative model of relations between social inequality, antagonism and conflict, confirmed by the developments in Eastern Europe between 1980 and 1990, anticipates quite different social and political reactions and outcomes. I argue that:

- the non-Marxist (Tocquevillian, Durkheimian and Weberian) theoretical perspectives offer a better guide to the relation between social inequalities, antagonism/conflict and social change in contemporary China than the Marxist one. In particular,
- industrial modernisation and economic growth in China increase the legitimacy and popular acceptance of economic (especially income) inequalities, but decreases the tolerance for socio-cultural inequalities (exclusions, restrictions of rights and freedoms). In other words, modern egalitarianism in China (as elsewhere), reflects growing concerns with exclusions, rather than hierarchies, and increasing aspiration for equal rights, freedoms and opportunities, rather than for

flattening of income hierarchies. Therefore ethno-regional antagonisms and popular mobilisations (related to exclusions) are more likely than class-type antagonisms/mobilisations (related to economic hierarchies);

- the increasing complexity of social inequalities (especially the links between party-political, regional and urban-rural dimensions) mitigates further against social polarisation and class-type mobilisation of popular discontent; and
- the key factor in the link between inequality, antagonism and social change is elite management of inequalities. The Chinese political leaders are united, and they use the highly effective 'management strategies': suppression of organized protests, local democratization, declared commitments to reducing 'disparities', pre-emptive (local) anti-corruption campaigns, and intense nationalism.

Since the argument focuses on the theoretical foundations, especially the underlying relations between social inequality, social conflict and change, the convenient starting point is a brief critical overview of the major and relevant theoretical perspectives. This overview forms a springboard for developing the core arguments and their application to contemporary developments in China.

## 2. The theoretical foundations

Four theoretical perspectives have shaped the social scientists' understanding of social inequalities, conflict and change: Marxist, Tocquevillian, Durkheimian and Weberian. Perhaps the best known, and still widely influential, is a 'classic' Marxist perspective that focuses on largely economic *class inequalities* and divisions, usually defined as unequal power and lifechances that reflect the ownership/employment position. Class schemes tend to be polar (owner/employer/rich vs worker/employee/poor), though the new versions introduced some gradations. More importantly, the Marxist perspective suggests: (i) class inequalities of wealth and income, and the accompanying class divisions form the basis of the social structure; (ii) that class divisions widen and 'simplify' (polarise) with capitalist development, thus resulting in a widening gap between the major classes; (iii) that this widening gap is increasingly perceived as illegitimate and hurtful, especially by the expanding working and peasant classes, thus increasing class antagonism and conflict (the latter implying class consciousness, identity and organisation); and that (iv) intensifying class antagonisms trigger social upheavals, especially when reinforced by economic downturns and/or political conflicts. These upheavals are typically seen as anti-capitalist egalitarian mobilisations.

This general vision, in all its numerous more and less sophisticated versions, has proven inadequate, contradicting historical development and empirical evidence. And yet, it has also proven remarkably persistent, doubtless, reflecting simplicity *cum* ideological appeal of the Marxist model, and the fact that it has been embraced as a program for social reconstruction by many post-revolutionary regimes. Yet, some alternative perspectives have also been gaining ground, even in China, where Marxist-Maoist orthodoxy is still dominant.

More or less at the same time as Karl Marx formulated his vision of class polarisation, conflict and anti-bourgeois revolution, based mainly on the experiences of rapidly industrialising Britain, Alexis de Tocqueville published a powerful analysis of social developments in France and North America. Tocqueville's (1950, 1952) diagnosis and prognosis were in many ways diametrically opposed to those of Marx. For a start, instead of class polarisation, he registered and predicted a progressive *equalization* of social conditions, expansion of democratic beliefs and practices, and proliferation of egalitarian culture. This progressive equalization, identified with 'social democratisation', was seen by Tocqueville as a historical 'master trend' that accompanies industrial modernisation. It reflects the cumulative impact of traditions (especially Christian values), expanding commerce and industry, increasing affluence, democratization of culture, and (in America) the growing strength of civil society.

Both Marx and Tocqueville add important qualifications to their contrasting theoretical visions. Industrial capitalism, according to Marx, does contain some egalitarian tendencies: it destroys aristocracies and undermines oppressive feudal divisions. Moreover, while temporarily increasing class divisions, over the long run capitalism triggers revolutionary upheavals that promote classless socialism. Tocqueville also qualifies his sanguine view of progressive equality of conditions. For a start, 'equality of conditions' is not identical to equality outcomes; the former imply equal opportunities, equal civic status, the absence of barriers to political participation and social mobility. Moreover, the egalitarian-democratic trend, he warns, may lead in a despotic-populist ('despotic') direction exemplified in his own time by the (post-)revolutionary developments in his native France – or it may progress in a liberal-democratic ('republican') direction identified with the American path of developments. These egalitarian paths are clearly demarcated. If the liberal-democratic tendencies prevail, social inequalities take the form of open social hierarchies and universal citizenship rights. If the egalitarian-populist tendencies prove victorious – as they do in revolutions – economically egalitarian but politically despotic central redistribution will prevail.

Note here a Tocquevillian departure from the Marxist vision: the egalitarian-populist revolutions typically occur *not* at the time of crisis and social polarisation, but following growth, reform and liberalization, when elite control weakens, and popular aspirations increase. (Note 2) Yet, Tocqueville promptly adds, the revolutionary hopes of an egalitarian social order are quickly dashed. While the central redistribution of property and income feeds into popular resentments

and egalitarian expectations, the redistributive order proves more politically exclusive and socially oppressive than the one abolished by the revolution. Economic inequalities may decline due to redistribution, but political inequalities, especially suppressed citizenship, generate massive exclusions and power gaps ('despotic democracy'). Therefore Tocqueville is sceptical about revolutions' egalitarian potential, and prizes the American liberal-egalitarian reforms. The latter are based on robust civil society, and they fulfil the egalitarian aspirations in the domain of cultural norms, civic liberties and political democracy.

Revolutions promote centralisation of power and arbitrary redistribution rather than egalitarian order, and the postrevolutionary 'despotic democracy' is a child of social turmoil rather than rational design. This turmoil erodes civil liberties, restricts deliberative political participation, and replaces authentic civic activism by mass centrally choreographed spectacles of allegiance to all-powerful leaders. At the heart of post-revolutionary 'despotic democracy' lies a paradox: a hidden disparity between redistributive economic egalitarianism, and political subordination to an unchecked central authority. Popularly endorsed 'democratic despots', observes Tocqueville, operate above the law, convention and social control. They encourage political passivity and social fragmentation: they easily forgive their subjects for not loving and trusting them, provided that they do not love and trust each other.

These contrasting Marxist and Tocquevillian visions were complemented by two more systematic diagnoses formulated at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Durkheim (1933) sees modern social hierarchies as reflecting synthetic evaluations of social standing (status) which, in turn, articulate the functional importance of occupational roles, and the nature of dominant values and ideologies (the *conscience collective*). Modern social hierarchies converge with occupational status hierarchies that tend to be consensual and integrative – a conclusion flying in the face of Marxist predictions. Social resentments and antagonisms, especially organised conflicts, are symptomatic of *anomie* (insufficient moral regulation), residual ascription, and group particularisms (egoistic group interests) – and they can be minimised by regulatory interventions by free occupational associations and the (regulative, rather than redistributive) state. While in pre-industrial societies social hierarchies are closed, rigid and ascribed, in industrial societies they tend to be open, flexible and achieved. Thus the modern social stratification that accompanies progressive occupational differentiation tends to be widely accepted as fair, provided it reflects the core values. Ascriptive privileges and enforced exclusions are symptomatic of pathological anomie (normlessness) and they trigger social protests. By contrast, modern status hierarchies that are not imposed, but emerge 'organically' so to speak, are seen as legitimate, that is meritocratic, and therefore unlikely to cause widespread social resentments and contestation. Legitimate hierarchies, in other words, reflect collective values and ideals, as well as the requirements of complex social organisation. (Note 3) Illegitimate inequalities and divisions are remnants of the past, or the results of political impositions. In modern societies legitimate-functional inequalities prevail and are legitimated in terms of *talent, investments, and performance* (application and efficiency). (Note 4) The illegitimate inequalities and discriminations – and Durkheim included here a broad range of class and ethno-racial inequalities condemned by socialists and liberals alike – are in decline; they are socially condemned and eliminated by state regulation and industrial reforms.

In a similar way Durkheim argues that the hierarchy of authority in the state is legitimate. State leaders carry the residues of sacred authority enjoyed by tribal chieftains and *pater familiae*. At the same time, the special role of the state – as the 'brain of society' – legitimates the authority of state elites. Political hierarchy, in this view, reflects both the functional importance (social coordination) and sacred traditions. This general argument, has been subsequently developed by social anthropologists and sociological functionalists. (Note 5)

This vision of complex, hierarchical yet typically harmonious modernisation contrasts with a less sanguine and more historically anchored Weberian perspective. Weber (1978) stressed both the inegalitarian (hierarchical and centralistic) and imposed nature of modernisation, the latter identified with progressive rationalization. Rationalisation is reflected in the spread of bureaucratic domination and centralisation of state authority, as well as the spread of the market relations, the rule of law, and professionalism. But he rejected Marx's views about centrality and inevitability of class antagonism and its polarising dynamics. Market, rather than property, relations are seen by Weber as the main 'class stratifiers' distributing the lifechances according to market endowments, mainly property and skill). Moreover, class hierarchies always overlapped with, and cross-cut, status and power-organizational hierarchies. The three combine into multi-dimensional complex and open gradations of societal power and lifechances. This mitigates against economic and social/class polarisation. The lifechances of individuals in modern society are resultant of their class position (according to market endowments), status position (according to social honour, standing, prestige), and their position in organizational hierarchies of command (according to authority, proximity to state elites). Modern nation-states command vast power resources and hold monopolies on enforcing laws, thus becoming the key containers of power and the key shapers of authoritative hierarchies. When lifechances are determined primarily by market endowments, class inequalities prevail. But in etatist societies, the main determinants of lifechances are positions in state hierarchies of command, and stratification there resembles a bureaucratic rank order.

With a remarkable degree of prescience, Weber (who died in 1920) suggested that state bureaucracies could suppress and overshadow class by subordinating the market to state commands. Contrary to the beliefs of socialists, though, this would not bring about a condition of classless egalitarianism, but a 'partocratic' hierarchy of power and privilege distributed according to proximity to the state power elite. He also identified a trend toward *complex inequalities*: a system of overlapping and cross-cutting hierarchies of class, status and command/authority. Moreover, he saw elites, especially state political directorates, as key shapers of social hierarchy and order. The centrality of political leadership is increasing with the growing means of central administration and mass persuasion. Modern state elites have much wider means to their disposal to defend (or undermine) social order: they can use the formidable bureaucratic administrative apparatus (if necessary, backed by force and intimidation), utilise a broad range of legitimations, and deploy the massive propaganda-persuasion machine – which is facilitated by state control of both the mass media and the education system.

These themes, especially the key role of leaders and political elites in 'formatting' social divisions, managing social order and directing social change, have been subsequently developed by contemporary modernisation and elite theorists. The former stress the socially de-polarising impact of modernisation, decomposition and fragmentation of major classes into occupational status hierarchies, and increasing complexity of social divisions, all combined with state management of social conflicts. The latter emphasize the ubiquity of hierarchy and the central role of elites in formatting and management of social inequalities, conflict and change.

### 3. Contemporary egalitarian mobilisations and elite management

The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved kinder to Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber, than to Marx. This has been reflected in contemporary views on social modernization, stratification and conflict, especially the interpretations of more recent developments in Eastern Europe and China.

Egalitarian contestation has been quite common in state-socialist Eastern Europe in the post-WWII period, but it turned mainly against privilege (in the context of shortages of consumer goods and sudden increases of food prices), political exclusion, local corruption and abuses of authority. Most notably, it took the form of predominantly localized protests that were easily defused through a mixture of coercion and accommodation. The Prague Spring reforms and mobilizations of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980-1 and then in 1988-89 were notable exceptions. The Solidarity movement initially mobilized in a 'Tocquevillian' sequence of rapid economic growth and liberal reforms followed by a sudden and rapid downturn. Moreover, the 1980-1 mobilization coincided with the 'succession crisis' within the partocratic leadership. The movement clearly rode on a crest of a powerful wave of popular expectations of prosperity (consumption) and political liberalization (pluralism). Both were frustrated by a sudden economic collapse.

Three moments proved decisive in Solidarity's successful mobilisation. First and foremost, the movement was promptly *organized* under the *charismatic leadership* of Lech Walesa into a 'free trade union' movement, with strong central organization aided by groups of *oppositional intellectuals*. It moved, in other words, from spontaneous protest to well organized reform movement, under a strong central leadership. Second, while it maintained the strongly egalitarian orientation and wore a protective mantle of a 'working class' and 'trade union' movement – thus protecting its 'political correctness' and legitimacy – in fact, it harnessed the *nationalistic* (widening the national autonomy), *libertarian* (improving civil liberties and human rights) and *egalitarian* (redressing the economic and power gaps) aspirations. Public resentments turned against the national party-state elite because the downturn was widely seen as the result of elite failures: incompetence, corruption and arrogance. The communist leaders were seen as Soviet stooges, and referred to as '*them*'. This facilitated the transformation of a protest movement into a national reform movement. Consequently, Solidarity was able to attract supporters and sympathizers in all social strata, all regions, all walks of life, including sections of party apparatus, though the most over-represented category were young, urban, educated and skilled workers (teachers, engineers, etc.). Third, the mobilisation caught the *political elite demoralised and internally divided*, in the middle of internal quarrels, reshuffles and succession struggles. The party-state leadership was temporarily weakened by divisions and incapable of playing the 'Soviet card'. (Note 6)

However, the circumstances soon changed. By the end of 1981, the party-state leadership emerged re-united and consolidated under the military leadership of General Wojciech Jaruzelski, while Solidarity became fragmented and disorganized, partly under the weight of its size, partly due to its 'anarchic pluralism', and partly due to the deepening economic crisis, social turmoil and growing political uncertainty – all increasing public anxieties. This opened the way for a swift suppression, combined with patriotic appeals that contained a veiled threat of the Soviet invasion. Solidarity was banned and its leadership interned. The movement was suppressed within a few weeks, though it simmered underground for the next seven years.

The combination of economic downturn, party privileges and 'elite factor' proved decisive again during 1988-9. Polish economy went into a tail-spin in 1988 under the weight of mismanagement and massive foreign debt. This, and the privileges for party officials, triggered social upheavals, tolerated because of the ascendancy of Gorbachev's reformists in the Soviet Union. The 'Gorbachev factor' had changed the political climate, especially when Jaruzelski in Poland

declared support for the Soviet reformists. Solidarity re-mobilised and forced the party-state elite into the 'round table' negotiations that led to 'contractual' elections in June 1989. The latter resulted in a resounding victory of the Solidarity camp, and paved the way for the peaceful dismantling of the partocratic regime. The liberal-democratic reforms that followed were 'sheltered' by the victorious Solidarity leaders, though the movement splintered into numerous parties and fractions.

What are the theoretical lessons from these developments?

First and foremost, they followed the Tocquevillian-Weberian-Durkheimian, rather than the Marxist, logic and trajectory. Most studies have consistently shown that tolerance for income disparities and acceptance of hierarchical authority have been increasing in the early stages of industrial modernisation, especially among the industrial workers, urban populations and in large-scale societies – as anticipated by Durkheim and Weber. (Note 7) Complex hierarchies become essential parts of social habitats of urban denizens of the modernizing and modernized worlds alike. Such denizens long for prosperity and security, more than equality, and interpret the latter in a more liberal fashion, as equity or *equality of opportunity, rights and entitlements*. Anti-hierarchical resentments survive among rural/agricultural workers whose daily operations are typically free of complex chains of bureaucratic subordination. At the same time, the tolerance for privilege and exclusion has been declining, as reflected by protests against discrimination, corruption (illicit privilege) and ascriptive exclusion. The patterns of social inequality, and the accompanying patterns of tolerance and resentment, in other words, have been changing, along the lines charted by Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber. The familiar 'meritocratic legitimization' of inequality – in terms of differential talent, investment and performance – gain widespread acceptance, (Note 8) while privilege, discrimination and ascriptive exclusion are condemned.

The marked- and bureaucracy-generated hierarchies seldom require explicit elite legitimization. They are largely self-legitimizing, provided that their growth accompanies increasing prosperity and stability. Where the economic and authority gaps are widening beyond legitimate bounds, elites 'manage' discontent by condemning them as 'distortions' and 'abuses'. Elites can also prevent diffuse discontent from turning into organized dissent by threat, propaganda and, occasionally, by force, and pre-empt, e.g., officially sanctioned anti-corruption campaigns. Since social antagonism transforms into social conflict only when it is organized, political elites can manage it quite effectively by a mixture of coercion, manipulation and accommodation. Only the weakened (by internal divisions and systematic failure) elites are vulnerable to serious popular challenges, and only if these challenges mobilize mass support, typically by harnessing the libertarian and nationalistic sentiments.

This point deserves special highlighting. Egalitarian sentiments and resentments alone do not trigger social dissent. They surface mainly as local, unorganized and easily defused protests. They seldom take a form of mass mobilizations and organized movements. The latter may happen when public expectations (of prosperity, security, liberty) are suddenly frustrated, when leaders organize the protests into a reform movement, and – most importantly – when the ruling elites are weakened, divided or otherwise unable to 'manage' the social and political order. This observation leads to a short comment about China.

#### **4. Implications for China**

China's market reforms accompany the rapid growth, declining poverty and the widening material inequality, combined with new forms of lifestyle inequalities (Young 2007, Xubei and Nong 2009). These inequalities are likely to be exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis that brings the inevitable increase of unemployment and poverty. Moreover, the crisis hits after the long period of sustained growth, widening opportunities, rising prosperity, increasing security and some liberalization. This may look like a 'Marxist scenario' heralding class polarization and mobilization fuelled by egalitarian resentments and directed against the urban rich as well as the party-state elite (rural poor vs urban rich, workers vs 'cadres').

However, as argued above, such wide class-like mobilizations are unlikely, incompatible with the theoretical framework outlined above, and counter to the developments of the last three decades in Eastern Europe. For a start, the Chinese elite, mindful of the disruptive legacies of previous class-like Cultural Revolution is unlikely to allow for such mobilizations – they would destroy the achievements of recent reforms. Moreover, the Chinese leadership seems relaxed about widening income gaps – perhaps justifiably so because the 'disparities', while wide and possibly increasing, seem to be in line with most developing nations (as well as the USA). The UN Human Development Reports estimate that China's income gaps are narrower than those of about 30 'leaders' in the inequality league. Moreover, the distribution of wealth (assets) in China remains relatively egalitarian – well below the comparable levels in the developing nations, including India, Brazil and Russia (as well as the USA). (Note 9) Also the scope of poverty, commonly regarded as a foundation and a 'trigger' of mass resentments, has not been wide, though the recent crisis may increase the poverty levels in rural areas and in less developed regions.

More importantly, in a truly Durkheimian fashion, Chinese society shows a widespread tolerance for income inequality, in fact, among the strongest tolerance in the developing world. (Note 10) This seems to be in line with the general

conclusion drawn from studies of social perceptions of inequality: 'Ordinary people do *not* believe in the equal distribution of income, at least not in any country for which we have good evidence. Far from it: they believe in a great deal of inequality, inequality arising in good part from what they see as legitimate rewards to education, occupational achievement, and job performance.' (Kelly and Evans 2009:20). Popular desires for prosperity, security ('sufficiency') opportunity and rights seem to displace expectations of egalitarian redistribution. The issues of distributive justice and exploitation are, at best, the background factors in mass public concerns, even in rural areas typically prone to egalitarian resentments. (Note 11)

The economic downturn, especially when accompanied by large unemployment, may fuel resentments in rural areas and trigger local protests. (Note 12) The downturn is likely to affect mainly the 'rural-urban migrant workers' most of whom, even when temporarily laid off, will move back to native villages. However, these resentments are unlikely to encompass the 'strategic' urban strata, and they are not likely to turn protests into a mass reformist movement. (Note 13) The central authorities look well prepared for the downturn, both economically (the large surplus makes it possible to mount a massive 'stimulus package' and welfare reform) and politically (emphasis on social stability and national unity). The economic 'disparities' are systematically 'managed' and played down by the leaders who frequently quote the most famous prediction of Deng Xiaoping: 'Some will get rich, others will follow'. (Note 14) Even if fewer people than expected follow the rich, and – following the economic downturn, some sink back into poverty – the central authorities are unlikely to be blamed. Unlike the Polish communist elites in the 1970s and 80s, the leaders in contemporary China are not seen as failures. Nor are they seen as 'foreign'. On the contrary, they are seen as defenders of Chinese interests in the situation when the economic downturn, and the hardship it brings, are widely blamed on the West. Thus in contrast to Poland on the eve of Solidarity mobilisation, nationalist passions in China are harnessed by the central authority and used for defusing (or re-directing) resentments. The Chinese elite takes credit for growth, spread of prosperity and international elevation, and avoids the blame for economic woes. It also looks strong and united around the reformist program that stresses social stability as the key condition of prosperity and national strength ('harmonious society').

This does not mean, of course, that the Chinese society is especially 'harmonious', that public grievances are rare, discontent is low, and that the 'legitimation formulas' and propaganda slogans are widely accepted. On the contrary, as mentioned above, the social gaps are quite wide, and they continue to widen, and discontent is widespread. However, they are *relatively* narrow, are controlled and 'managed' by elites in the way that defuses social mobilisations of egalitarian resentments, particularly among the 'strategic' social strata, and in the way that re-direct public resentments away from central authorities. (Note 15) Opinion polls show resentments against local officials but persisting popularity of the central leadership. The most frequently identified public grievances are against (corrupt) local authorities, and they include restrictions on rural-urban migration, forced land acquisitions, local corruption, restriction on land sales, excessive local tax and levies, penalties, poor health services, environmental pollution and degradation, and compulsory assessments (Lee 2007, Ho 2005, Young 2007:26). The articulations of grievances are local, 'cellular', specific and small-scale, resulting in civic (rights) activism. They increasingly move 'from streets to courts', prompt legal challenges, and boost local rights activism. Moreover, the authorities react by mixing suppression – directed against organized and large scale protests (Fallun Gong, Tibetan and Xinjiang autonomy) – and accommodation: 'paying attention', 'hearing voices', responding to 'constructive criticism'. (Note 16) Democratisation is formally embraced as the national objective, but it is given a specific meaning: it is identified with local elections, judicial independence and fighting corruption through increasing transparency. (Note 17)

Thus the key 'generative' conditions of mass protest mobilization seem to be missing. If the theoretical predictions formulated above are correct, public aspirations (prompted by messages from reformist elites) should be shifting in the liberal direction and increase pressures for freedom, opportunity, legalism and rights. Such shifts coincide with the change of emphasis from *material* to *civic* sphere and from *simple equality* to differentiated *equity*. As noted by students of public perceptions, public tolerance for widening and complex hierarchies of income and authority is increasing, together with de-collectivisation of land, privatization of SOEs, and general marketisation of rewards. Collectivistic redistributive egalitarianism seems to be losing its former attractiveness, especially among the urban industrial populations. It tends to be associated with Maoist policies and their failures. This shift is reflected in the official legitimation formulas and elite-promoted nationalism, as well as the officially supported revival of Confucian traditions.

## 5. Conclusions

Modern egalitarianism, as suggested by Tocqueville and Durkheim, reflects concerns with exclusions, rather than hierarchies, and with equal rights, freedoms and opportunities, rather than income hierarchies and collective entitlements. Unless overwhelmed by revolutionary central-redistributive projects, egalitarian sentiments and aspirations turn libertarian. Public sentiments, especially among the educated urban strata, become individualistic and tolerant of 'meritocratic' disparities in income and authority. They shift, in other words, away from the collectivistic redistributive-material egalitarianism, and towards individualistic-liberal egalitarianism, towards aspirations for

individual freedom, opportunity, autonomy and recognition. Such orientations, according to the theorists of modernization, gradually prevail among the urban industrial strata. Most of these strata seem to embrace the reforms and the accompanying wide and complex hierarchies.

Moreover, with progressive industrial modernization, social change is increasingly directed and controlled by state elites. As noted by Weber, this is not only because prosperity and market reforms undermine the egalitarian expectations, but also because modern urban life accustoms people to complex bureaucratic hierarchies. It also increases the salience of national identities. Such identities and sentiments – typically cultivated by political elites – over-ride class identities and solidarities. This means that democratic reforms take the direction of highly national-populist ‘leader democracy’.

This theoretical picture seems increasingly relevant for China. Chinese society undergoes a most rapid industrial modernization combined with urbanization on the unprecedented scale. The rapidly expanding urban strata embrace the reforms as a success, even though the benefits are distributed in an uneven way. As pointed by Lee (2007:8), ‘The vast majority of educated Chinese have been winners as a result of economic reform. For many, political disgruntlement and collective sense of relative deprivation have given way to economic ambitions and upward social mobility facilitated by an ability to effectively navigate China’s integration into the world economy’. These urban strata form ‘an enormous middle’ that comprise nearly half of the population (Young 2007:32). The experience of social mobility, combined with the awareness of China’s economic development, should make this ‘enormous middle’ highly tolerant of inequalities. (Note 18) The rural-agricultural segments, especially when prompted by political leaders, may embrace collectivistic redistributive-material egalitarianism, and vent their resentments (against inequality as well as social discrimination and exclusion) in public protests. However, these segments are impoverished of cultural and political ‘capitals’, and therefore unlikely to be effectively mobilized and challenge the central authorities. Their pent-up grievances and egalitarian resentments may fuel local protests that result in temporary tightening of central control, rather than lasting reforms.

Most importantly, the Chinese political elite looks united around the current leadership (the first one ascending to power through orderly succession) and around the market-reformist program. This program is portrayed as the best developmental path to mass prosperity, widening economic security, as well as China’s increasing international power and prestige. Economic growth and the accompanying prosperity are linked with social stability: they condition each other. The leaders use the highly effective ‘management strategies’ that combine strong social controls, local democratization, commitments to reducing ‘disparities’, and pre-emptive anti-corruption campaigns with appeals to national unity and pride. Such appeals to both economic interests and national sentiments prove very effective in generating mass consent, especially among the growing urban strata.

There are also some other stabilizing factors. The current economic downturn highlights the dangers of the ‘export-led’ strategy of growth and the accompanying imbalances in national accounts (China’s precarious surplus-reserves). Therefore it is anticipated that the next stage of Chinese reforms will stimulate domestic consumption – a move that is likely to be both popular among the urban strata and egalitarian in its impact. There are also some indications that the Chinese elite attempts to defuse widespread public concerns about pollution and environmental degradation – an increasingly significant source of social resentments and tensions. Such strategies of pre-emptive defusing have proven effective and conducive to further elite-directed reforms. Considering the predominantly elite-directed ‘top-down’ pattern of change in the last three decades, this would not be surprising.

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## Notes

Note 1. An early version of this paper was presented at RC28 2009 Spring Meeting, School of Sociology and Population Studies, Renmin University, Beijing, China, May 14-16, 2009. I am grateful to Professor Baogang He for his comments and suggestions – incorporated in this version.

Note 2. As noted by Tocqueville, 'It is not always by going from bad to worse that a society falls into revolution. It happens most often that a people, that has supported without complaint... the most oppressive laws, violently throws them off as soon as their weight is lightened.... Only great genius can save a prince who undertakes to relieve his subjects after a long oppression. The evil, which was suffered patiently as inevitable, seems unendurable as the idea of escaping from it is conceived.' (1952:186)

Note 3. Inequalities related to uneven distribution of property were seen by Durkheim (1933) as legitimate, in clear contrast with Marx and Weber, both of whom saw them as reflections of exploitative domination..

Note 4. Durkheim (1963) attributed to property a sacred/religious origin, and he saw the divisions between owners and workers as legitimated by the residues of property's sacred status. 'Private property was born because individuals turned to their own advantage, their own use, the respect society inspires'. The legal exclusions that accompanied property rights revealed for Durkheim clear links with taboos and rituals. In Durkheim's (1963) view, stratification, especially in ownership of land, has always been linked with strong collective identities. These identities are generated and transmitted through social classifications – popular symbolic taxonomies that shape social perceptions and distances, especially between 'us' and 'them'. Durkheim's studies of 'primitive classifications' form a theoretical foundation of the social anthropology of inequality.

Note 5. Durkheim's second contribution to sociology of inequality concerns the form and the evolution of occupational hierarchies. Social differentiation (the 'division of labour') is elevated by Durkheim (1933) to the status of the constitutive process of modernization. It has resulted in the fragmentation of larger social units, such as feudal estates, guilds and classes, and their replacement by hierarchical but socially open occupational strata, groups and associations. Durkheim predicts that relationships between occupational groups is likely to be harmonious, mainly because of the regulation by occupational associations (proto-trade unions) and the state – the key agents of national integration. Occupational strata thus become central elements of increasingly complex but harmonious social stratification. The state and occupational associations manage national integration and cohesion.

Note 6. The prospects of a Soviet intervention were lessened by Brezhnev's illness (he died in 1982), preoccupation with Afghanistan (invaded one year earlier), and new confrontation with the USA (where Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980). This gave the leaders of the movement an opportunity for a relatively 'low risk' national mobilization.

Note 7. For example, Kelley and Zagorski (2005), Evans and Kelley (2007).

Note 8. Such legitimations, though, do not cover the entire spectrum of inequality; poverty is widely condemned as illegitimate, as well as privileges of top businessmen and officials. However, the major public outrage has always been directed against 'illicit' privilege and ascriptive exclusion – both correctly regarded as corrosive of social order.

Note 9. See, for example, the *Human Development Report 2006*, Davies 2006, Young 2007, Xubei and Nong 2009. It must be remembered, though, that the land contract system, which gives a minimal level of security in using land, distorts the comparative statistics on 'assets' and 'net worth inequality'.

Note 10. See Kelley and Evans (2009), esp. Table 4.6.

Note 11. As pointed out by Martin Whyte, the 2004 national representative survey of popular attitudes in China indicates that the disadvantaged people in the rural/remote areas are not particularly concerned by the rising inequality. The author suggests that they trust the 'Deng's promise' of forthcoming prosperity 'for all'.

Note 12. As noted by Young (2007:22), the number of 'mass incidents' of local unrest were growing steadily between 2003 and 2005, but they declined (or were under-reported) in recent years.

Note 13. The currently booming urban areas are vulnerable to a sudden burst of the real-estate bubble. Also the shaky public banks may experience difficulties. That may trigger some urban unrest.

Note 14. The measures that are most frequently mentioned include the new cooperative medical insurance, reduction of school fees, basic income scheme, rural investment (especially the Western Development Strategy), 'fees to taxes' reform, end of illegal land seizures, and the agricultural loan scheme (Young 2007:25-6)

Note 15. See, for example, Young (2007). Many commentators list gender and regional aspects of inequalities as socially 'under-registered', as not attracting the level of attention expected on the basis of their absolute and relative size.

Note 16. See He 2006, Lee 2007, Young 2007. One should also note the impact of some specifically Chinese cultural 'stabilisers' of the social and political order. The current reformist stage of Chinese industrial modernization is steeped in Confucian traditions. These traditions carry respect for authority and hierarchy, but also in sensitivity to 'illicit privilege' and corruption – both capable of undermining the authority of the officialdom, but only when seen as morally tainted. This makes 'corruption' and 'abuse' very sensitive issues, but also opens the way of defusing public resentments through officially sanctioned local anti-corruption campaigns.

Note 17. This was the interpretation offered by Premier Wen in 2006, as reported in Thornton (2008:4).

Note 18. This regularity has been explored by Kelly and Kelly (2009).