China in an Era of Transition: Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors

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China in an Era of Transition
Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors

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China’s recent rise to prominence has resulted in constant media attention and academic enquiries; its successes and scandals are swiftly brought to the forefront of the public’s consciousness. However, the nation’s achievements and failures are often viewed in a vacuum, where little thought is given to the interrelatedness of social issues from both state and society perspectives. Given the continued dominance of the Chinese state in many aspects of society, yet, bearing in mind the growing role of social actors in shaping China’s development, the contributors of this collection restate our understanding of the challenges facing the nation by presenting a nuanced view of Chinese state-society relationship.

Thirty years of unrelenting economic development has created a range of social issues that China needs to contend with to ensure it does not hamper future growth. Factors such as urbanization, the marginalization of social groups, the emergence and influence of the business elites, and the potential for dissent by Internet users, present interesting challenges and insights into the workings between state and society. The pressing nature of these issues has given rise to new social actors. The cumbersome state has meant social actors, such as entrepreneurs and migrant workers, are increasingly relying on themselves, rather than waiting for solutions directed by the government. Nonetheless, the state is still dominant and far from retreating from the social realm—it is presently reconfiguring itself to “better manage” society. What we see is the beginning of an era of transition where the Chinese state no longer has a monopoly on managing social development.

Social actors are demonstrating their activeness in managing their own affairs, but at the same time negotiating with the state to increase the space afforded to them to further advance their causes. Rather than treating social actors as victims of the state’s persistent drive for economic growth,
Jennifer Hubbert examines the role of retired intellectuals and their relationship with the state. Her chapter suggests intellectuals who emerged from Mao’s period have had varied experiences due to economic liberalization. Nevertheless, intellectuals have been able to utilize their narrative of suffering from the Maoist period, where they were under-appreciated for their skills and marginalized for the sake of national development. As a result of their sufferings, they now use their experiences to lay moral claim on contemporary China. That is, they have deployed their sufferings to legitimize their moral authority to represent the nation.

The relationship between women and the state have also seen dramatic shifts since the start of economic reforms. Carrie Liu Currier’s chapter illustrates that unlike intellectuals, women workers in present day China have become increasingly marginalized at the hands of the state, where they are encouraged to return to more traditional household roles. Currier argues the Chinese state has effectively adopted policies favoring a more flexible female workforce to appease the more volatile male workforce. She demonstrates if the state continues to negatively intervene against female workforce, there is great potential for dissatisfaction that may evolve into more overt forms of activism. Overall, Currier’s chapter suggests the need to be aware of the possibility for social action against the state, especially if further state failures continue for various social groups.

The tension between the state and ethnic groups is another issue deserving significant attention. Reza Hasmath’s chapter on ethnic minorities in Beijing depicts the importance of the integration of ethnic minorities to the development of the city. However, for a variety of policy and sociological reasons discussed in the chapter, despite having higher levels of education than the majority Han, ethnic minorities are poorly represented in high wage, education-intensive occupational sectors. What we see in Hasmath’s assessment of Beijing’s ethnic minorities is again inequity in the employment situation, similar to Currier’s observations on the female workforce.

Ian Morley’s chapter on the management of urbanization across China demonstrates this desire on the part of the state to reinforce the developmental ideal, but within a discourse shaped by the elites. The spatial transformation that is taking place in Chinese cities shows that while the urban elites are attempting to speak of shared values of “modernization” to benefit all, owing to an unequal distribution of wealth from China’s tremendous economic development, urban restructuring has had different meanings for various urban actors. Seemingly, urban elites have negotiated the terrains of economic development and have translated the abstract into reality, as evidenced by the high rises erected across the China’s urban landscapes.
The mechanism behind the spatial transformations outlined in Morley’s chapter is the focus for Xiaogang Deng, Lening Zhang, and Andrea Leverntz. Their chapter focuses on the dual land use policy that is prevalent in China, especially examining the state’s acquisition of land for “public interests” with little or no compensation. Deng et al. reveal that the convergence of interests by developers and government officials has essentially marginalized those who are most dependent on their land for a livelihood. The decentralization of the power structure has given local governments greater autonomy to design and enforce policies, and what is occurring is a state structure that is failing to protect its citizens.

Spatial transformation of the urban areas is not only occurring under the direction of urban elites, but also at the hands of migrant workers. Li Zhang’s study of chengzhongcun literally meaning “village within a city,” maps the dynamic relationship between the state and migrants and indigenous villagers of chengzhongcun. Far from victims of the state’s ideal of development and modernization, villagers and migrants have defied government attempts to bring order to the chaotic development of these chengzhongcun. Where there is demand for housing from migrant workers moving into the cities, there will be attempts by villagers to subvert the authorities to supplement their income.

The theme of migrant workers is further developed in Jennifer Hsu’s chapter, focusing on the role of the state in the development of civil society organizations representing migrant workers in Beijing and Shanghai. The surfacing of these organizations is indicative that the room for new social actors to participate in the development of the nation is certainly larger than prereform times and it is in part, attributable to the state’s decreasing capacity. What we see in Hsu’s chapter is the savvy nature of these organizations to work within the confines of government boundaries to gradually push for change for migrant workers and also extending the borders of their work.

Similarly in Jing Yang’s chapter on entrepreneurs in China, is their adaptation strategy to the political environment to advance their own agenda. While Yang shows that new and young entrepreneurs are increasingly active in the realm of economic policies, it is not for the purpose of sociopolitical change. Thus, the role and intentions of these new social actors is juxtaposed against the backdrop of continuing economic change and expectation for political transformation.

This is further supported by Joshua Su-Ya Wu’s chapter on the Taiwanese business community (TBC) in China. The presence of the TBC in China has reshaped not only the economic landscape, but also the social and cultural ones, where they are most active. The closeness of their relationship with the state as suggested by Wu, fosters a culture of collusion and
corruption. However, such a relationship is profit driven and rarely is it used in such a sense where it positively affects sociopolitical development. The style of doing business and the lifestyle and norms that the Taiwanese bring to their new Chinese environment is threatening the social harmony of the existing community. Therefore, instead of seeing the state as the exploitative factor in the state-society relationship, both cases of entrepreneurs have utilized their position as new and wealthy social actors to advocate the state to expand their areas of economic operation.

One of the main observations that emerge from the chapters thus far is that the Chinese state is not as homogenized as it first appears. Paul Thiers’ chapter focuses on the emergence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the dual identity of the state in its dealings with various stakeholders. Economic reforms have given or necessitated the need for government institutions to find new sources of income and as a consequence, the formation of corporations has increased the possibility of state fragmentation. Thiers therefore highlights the need to consider the relationship between state and semi-state institutions, suggesting a view for potential political pluralism.

The state-society relationship emerging from online public communities and its relationship with China’s foreign relations is explored in the final chapter. Junhao Hong examines the development of patriotic online forums that emerge out of foreign disputes, and assess whether these new social actors can pave the way for greater political participation. In particular, Hong ponders whether the increasing rate of Internet availability and usage across China will unavoidably lead toward political liberalization. Regardless of whether this eventuates in the near future, it does illustrate the importance of nonstate actors in the process of social change.

The range of social actors that have emerged during this era of transition exhibits varying levels of relationships with the state. The Chinese state may still be dominant, but it is clearly no longer the only visible stakeholder in the country’s social development. As will be seen in various cases throughout the chapters, economic development has created vastly different experiences across the society, where those affected have become more proactive in resolving the issues confronting them. The space for their growth will expand. It is clear that the state needs to acknowledge their existence and contribution to China if it is to avoid social instability. Which begs the question, how will the state reposition itself? What appears to be emerging is a state that is adapting to the needs of society, but simultaneously reasserting itself through social actors to maintain legitimacy and reassert its usefulness to its citizenry.