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The Dilemma of Stability Preservation in China

FENG Chongyi

Stability preservation (维稳, *weiwēn*) has been a core policy of the Chinese communist government for the last two decades. China is the only major country in the contemporary world to have set up stability preservation offices at all levels of government alongside the normal administrative institutions for social control. These offices are mainly staffed by the existing personnel of the security apparatus, who in turn exercise control over people and the propaganda apparatus, who exercise control over information. The consequences of the stability preservation policy and the “system of stability preservation” (维稳体制, *weiwēn tǐzhì*) are widely reported in the media, but the academic community is still in the initial stages of understanding the process of this unique phenomenon in China (Sandby-Thomas 2011; Shambaugh 2000; Social Development Research Group 2010; Sun 2009; Yu 2009). Why has the Chinese government pursued this policy? Is stability preservation in China a conventional issue of “law and order”? Are the policy and institutions of stability preservation effective in providing social and political stability? What are the implications of these special arrangements for China and the Chinese communist regime in the long run?

Causes of Social Unrest

Social unrest has become a normal feature of China today, with about 500 “mass incidents” (群体事件, *qunti shìjiàn*) a day on average (Sun 2009). These collective protests are part of the “rights defence movement” (维权运动, *weiquan yùndòng*), a broadly based social movement involving all social strata throughout the country to assert human rights through individual and collective litigation, petitions, campaigns and protests (Feng 2009: 150–168; Benny 2012). Most cases of rights defence aim to defend economic and social rights and include, but are not limited to, protests by peasants against forced seizures of farmland; strikes by workers against low pay and poor working conditions; protests by home owners against forced eviction by government and developers; protests by residents against forced relocations; campaigns by citizens against

unpaid social entitlements; and protests by affected residents against environmental pollution. However, apart from ethnic conflicts and riots in Tibet and Xinjiang, the active defence of civil and political rights is also on the rise and includes campaigns by lawyers, journalists and writers for the freedoms of speech and the press; campaigns by Christians from the house churches and Falungong practitioners for the freedom of religion, beliefs, assembly and association; campaigns against arbitrary detention, “re-education through labour”, torture and excessive implementation of the death penalty; and campaigns against injustice and abuses of public power by victims of party-state agents. Notably, thousands of petitioners have flocked to Beijing or provincial capitals to seek redress for perceived injustices. The rights defence movement is greatly enhanced by the emergence of an incipient civil society, with about four million NGOs and “semi-NGOs” – according to the widely accepted estimate that officially registered NGOs account for only 10 per cent of the total – and the rapid development of the Internet in China, which had 564 million netizens as of the end 2012 (China Internet Network Information Center 2013).

Growing social unrest in China reflects deep institutional problems that create structural injustice and block legal remedies for victims. First, the incipient civil society is kept under tight control, and disadvantaged groups (弱势群体, *ruoshibi qunti*) such as peasants and rural migrant workers are not allowed to have their own organisations to safeguard their rights and interests, including representation in negotiations and engagements with other parties in collective bargaining. The official trade union in China is an arm of the Chinese government and there are no independent trade unions to safeguard the rights and interests of workers, especially in labour disputes over low wages and poor working conditions. Peasant associations were used as a political tool by the party during the Mao years, but they have been banned in the reform era, leaving the peasantry without even pretend representation by the state-controlled “mass organisations” allocated to other social groups such as workers, women and youth.

Second, endemic corruption and abuse are bred by and rooted in China’s power structure, where bottom-up mechanisms to make power-holders accountable to citizens are absent. As demonstrated by convincing surveys and analysis, what angers Chinese citizens enough for them to confront the system by taking to the streets are, in most instances, not the income gap or inequality *per se*, but procedural injustices and unequal

access to opportunities due to abuses of power by the powerful and rich, who monopolise resources and benefits (Whyte 2010).

Third, the monopoly of all formal political and legal institutions by the party-state apparatus deprives citizens of effective redress of their rights and grievances through legal or formal political processes. One survey found that the cases of seeking formal legal channels to resolve grievances accounted for less than 2 per cent of the total of all cases surveyed (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2004: 72). It has also been reported that only 0.2 per cent of the total petitions to the Offices of Letters and Visits (信访办公室, *xinfang bangongsi*) are addressed by authorities (Zhao 2004).

Last but not least, the “system of stability preservation” creates special conditions and incentives for local officials to abuse citizens and force them to take defensive actions, legally or otherwise. Local governments at the township and county levels are required to collect extra-budgetary revenue (预算外收入, *yusuanwai shouru*) or self-raised funds (自筹资金, *zichou zijin*) to cover part of the stability expenditure, such as salaries for casual personnel and financial settlements for disputes. The most common sources of extra-budgetary revenue are generated by undermining the rights and interests of citizens, including doling out fines for violating family-planning laws, collecting rents and income from leasing and selling collective land, and extracting fees and “donations” from local enterprises. As a consequence, family planning and land seizure by local governments have become common causes of social unrest in the countryside.

The “responsibility system” (责任追究制, *zeren zhuijiu zhi*) to evaluate the work performance of local cadres also exacerbates social unrest. Social order is set as one of the “one-vote veto” (一票否决, *yi piao foujue*) targets, which can be used to nullify a cadre’s achievements in meeting other performance targets. Failure to prevent either “mass incidents” or “petitioning to higher levels” (越级上访, *yueji shangfang*) can cancel out positive performance in other areas and result in the loss of promotions, among other punishments (The Central Public Security Comprehensive Management Commission 1991; Minzner 2006).

Repressive measures taken by local officials to meet this veto category of targets, such as suppressing manifestations of grievances, further infringe upon the rights of citizens and actually force them to resort to collective protests and petitions with the hope that the intervention of higher-level authorities may resolve their grievances.

Preserving Stability at the Expense of the Rule of Law?

If stability preservation in China today is a “law-and-order” issue in a “normal” society, one would expect the government to consider the pursuit of the rule of law as a key policy. Social order can be achieved and maintained only when no individuals or political organisations are above the law, the rights and legitimate interests of citizens are well protected by the law, legal remedies are available to address injustices and grievances, and social conflicts can be resolved through formal political and legal channels. The Chinese government has, in fact, put the establishment of the rule of law on the reform agenda. Since the 1980s, the regime has made efforts to carry out legal reforms and come to terms with human rights norms as delineated by international treaties. By the 2000s, for the first time in Chinese thinking, a clear distinction began to be made between the rule of law (法治, *fazhi*, rulers subject to and limited by the law for protection of human rights and justice) and rule by law (法制, *fazhi*, law as a tool for the rulers to control the population). In the meantime, the CCP leadership has created and allowed space for the growth of the legal profession, with more than 200,000 lawyers employed at 19,000 law firms in China today. Four amendments to the Constitution, in 1988, 1993, 1999 and 2004, have endorsed important goals and principles such as “to rule the country according to law and build a socialist country under the rule of law”, “to protect private ownership” and “to respect and safeguard human rights”. The 1989 Administrative Litigation Law authorised the judicial review of government decisions and lawsuits against government agencies. The government signed the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* in 1997 (ratified in 2001) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* in 1998 (pending ratification). More broadly, legal reform and development in China have been characterised by massive transplantation of Western laws into the Chinese legal system (Zou 2006). By the end of 2012, the impressive body of legislature included 243 laws, 721 national administrative regulations and more than 9,000 local administrative regulations (*People’s Daily* Commentary Department 2013a).

However, the rule-of-law rhetoric notwithstanding, the rigorous formulation of laws is accompanied by their pervasive violation and highly selective enforcement, due largely to the government’s priority of stability preservation. The government is the primary violator of its own

laws. From the perspective of principal–agent relations, there is a tacit approval from the central government of the state bureaucracy ignoring laws and regulations in achieving the policy priorities of stability and economic growth, which are believed to be preconditions of each other. The Chinese central government has juxtaposed economic development and social stability as the twin priority tasks since 1989, although it was in 2005 when Deng Xiaoping’s two separate statements “stability overrides everything” (稳定压倒一切, *wending yadao yiqie*) and “development is the unyielding principle” (发展是硬道理, *fazhan shi ying daoli*) were combined into the formula “development as an unyielding principle and stability as non-negotiable responsibility” (发展是硬道理, 稳定是硬任务, *fazhan shi yingdaoli, wending shi ying renwu*). These policy priorities actually create systematic imperatives for the state bureaucracy, local governments and security apparatuses, in particular, to fulfil their responsibilities at any costs, resulting in rampant corruption, manipulation of information, seizures of village land and urban housing for development projects, damage to the environment, abuse of the law, violation of the law, harassment of rights activists, suppression of local discontent, and the use of violence within certain limits. Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution stipulates that “citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration”. Whereas this clause on rights and freedoms in the Constitution is routinely ignored or violated, those unconstitutional, “evil laws” (恶法, *e fa*), such as the harsh punishment for subversion, for “inciting subversion of state power” and for committing other political crimes under the Criminal Law, as well as the arbitrary punishment of loosely defined crimes of evidence falsification by lawyers in the Lawyers Law, are enforced with exceeding enthusiasm.

Worse still, stability preservation in China today relies predominantly on extralegal measures and methods, which has the effect of undermining social stability and existing legal institutions. Under the guise of preserving stability, the state bureaucracy has been given a free hand, more coercive power and more resources to crush dissent. One common practice on the part of the government is to bypass the law and use the notorious scheme called “re-education through labour”, a system of administrative detentions carried out arbitrarily by the police circumventing the judicial system, with sentences of up to four years. Detainees are subject to forced political education and various forms of torture. Rights defence lawyers (恶法, *e fa*) promote legal processes as a means of improving

Chinese human rights conditions and who commit to reducing social unrests by channelling citizen discontent into legislative and judiciary institutions, have become a primary target for suppression. They have experienced frequent harassment by the party-state: They have been blacklisted, suspended, monitored, confined, detained and even jailed (Human Rights Watch 2008). In the recent government preemptive strike on Middle Eastern-style protests in connection with an online call to gather in public places – the so-called “Jasmine Spring” of 2011 – rights lawyers have again become major targets of intimidation and abuse (Wong 2011). Besides criminal and extralegal punishments, administrative sanctions on lawyers, such as suspending and revoking their licences during annual reviews, are routinely exacted by local Justice Bureaus and their proxies, the lawyers’ associations. Media reports in China showed that at least 150 political “criminals” have been imprisoned under the Hu–Wen leadership over the past ten years (Bei 2012). Currently, China’s record is as bad as Iran’s in terms of jailing dissident journalists. Reporters without Borders ranked China 174th out of 179 countries in its 2011/2012 worldwide index of press freedom (Reporters without Borders 2012). The crackdown on human rights activists and other dissidents has been so intensive and extensive in recent years that legal scholars at home and abroad have pointed to a retrogression of Chinese official legal reform toward the rule of law (Cohen 2009; Jiang 2009).

At a more fundamental level, the rule of law is incompatible with a Leninist party-state, simply because the core of Leninism is “proletarian dictatorship”, which, according to the classic definition by Lenin himself, means “nothing other than power totally unlimited by any laws and based directly on the use of violence” (Lenin 1972: 623). There is little wonder that law enforcement institutions in China, including the police, the prosecutor’s office, and the courts are still lumped together as the “political and legal branch” (政法部门, *zhengfa bumen*) and the “dictatorship organs” (专政机关, *zhuanzheng jiguan*) of the party-state – their primary function is to suppress dissidents rather than control criminals in the conventional sense.

There are growing voices not only among Chinese liberal intellectuals but also within the party-state that stability should not and cannot be sought at the expense of the rule of law. With reflections on the outrageous case where Anyuanding (安元鼎), a private security company in Beijing, was paid enormous sums of money by local governments all over China to kidnap, lock up and repatriate petitioners, the influential

commentator Xiao Shu pointed out that the local governments believed it was politically correct to ignore the law and do all kinds of evil as long as all actions were carried out in the name of “preserving stability”. Xiao states that it was of paramount importance to use the Constitution and the law in bringing “stability preservation” under control within the legal framework (Xiao 2010). The *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has published a series of articles recently to promote the rule of law in maintaining social stability. It has been argued that the objective of stability preservation, just as that of law, is to serve the fundamental interests of the people (Huang 2012); that it is essential to abide by the idea and methods of the rule of law in resolving social contradictions and preserving stability (*People’s Daily Commentator* 2013a); that the government abiding by the law is the precondition for the people to abide by the law (*People’s Daily Commentary Department* 2013b); and that the substance, procedure and effect of the law in dealing with every case must reflect judicial justice (*People’s Daily Commentator* 2013b). In an article published in *The Study Times* (学习时报, *Xuexi Shibao*), the weekly newspaper run by the Central School of the CCP, two brave commentators lament that pervasive violation of laws to preserve stability has done serious damage to the credibility of the law in China. According to them, many measures taken while under pressure to preserve stability – administrative detentions and education through labour, in particular – are against the spirit of the rule of law and must be rectified (Cai and Chen 2013).

Further Erosion of Regime Legitimacy under the System of Stability Preservation

According to plausible synthesis, state legitimacy is rightful rule, where rightfulness entails meeting the moral standards of a given citizenry. A state or a government (the distinction between the two is usually obscured by undemocratic regimes) is legitimated by exercising political power with legality, moral justification and popular consent (Gilley 2009: 5–8). A lack of, or serious deficit in, legitimacy produces tremendous fear of revolt and anxiety, if not full-blown paranoia, among ruling elites about regime survival. The CCP leadership seems to believe the party has the resources to eliminate any threat to its monopoly on power. But they know the foundation of regime stability is fragile (Shirk 2007: 56). It is the constant legitimacy crisis resulting from the bankruptcy of com-

munist ideology, structural corruption, social alienation and rejection of aspirations for democracy and human rights by the ruling elite since 1989 that has prompted the Chinese communist regime to formulate and implement the policy of preserving stability. However, it is precisely this policy of preserving stability and the system of stability preservation that exacerbate the legitimacy crisis evidenced by a whole range of symptoms such as the deepening of crises of belief, confidence and trust (信仰危机、信心危机、信任危机, *xinyang weiji*, *xinxin weiji*, *xinren weiji*); the worsening of elite corruption and moral degeneration; the growth of civil disobedience and unrest; the spread of crime; and the emerging secession movements among Tibetans, Uyghurs and Mongolians.

Not surprisingly, the diagnosis of “regime legitimacy crisis” in China is hotly contested by some China scholars. Their arguments in dismissing the legitimacy crisis of the Chinese communist regime can be summarised in the following way: First, evidence from high-profile surveys, including from the Pew Global Attitudes Project and the Asian Barometer Survey, has demonstrated that the majority of the Chinese population is satisfied with their government and political system; in fact, satisfaction rates are higher in China than among people living in democracies *vis-à-vis* their respective governments/ political systems. Second, some scholars argue that the Chinese government truly deserves this high approval rate from the population, due to not only “performance legitimacy” in managing rapid economic growth, improving living standards and providing welfare and services, but also to nationalistic legitimacy in making China a “glorious great power”, as well as to political legitimacy in providing good governance in the areas of maintaining stable social order, promoting greater accountability and broadening political participation. Third, according to these scholars, social protests do not pose a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese communist regime: Popular protests tend to challenge local governments, but not the central government, and to demand policy change but not regime change; in addition, ethnic riots and the threat of separatism are not major concerns as the state has won over the majority of the economic and political elites of the minority groups (Gries and Rosen 2010, 2004).

These arguments provide a sensible explanation for the extraordinary duration and resilience of communist autocracy in China, but from both the methodological and theoretical perspectives, they seem to confuse regime legitimacy with regime survival (illegitimate regimes can survive very long periods of time for a variety of reasons). At the methodo-

logical level, attitudes surveys in authoritarian countries are not always reliable and are sometimes problematic to the point of being misleading, given that almost all of the surveys in the former Soviet Union and other autocracies before their collapse showed overwhelming popular support for the government. People in communist societies live in profound fear. Mindful of the deadly consequences of dissent, they do not usually reveal to strangers their negative assessment of the party, nor do they have reasonable access to information to cultivate informed and stable opinions, thanks to strict censorship and thought control. Their attitudes can shift overnight when they are presented with choices and opportunities for change, as evidenced by the experience of swift regime change in the former communist world from 1989 to 1991. The remaining five communist regimes (China, Vietnam, North Korea, Laos and Cuba) have survived with vastly different strategies, a fact that presents a puzzle for anyone attempting to trace their survival back to their legitimacy.

Claims based on problematic survey evidence fail to recognise the growing influence of the liberal force in China. It is true that the party-state has been successful in using the proved divide-and-conquer strategy, in which protest leaders are punished as criminal elements while measured concessions are made to ordinary participants to prevent isolated popular protests from developing into sustained movements of national scale. However, it is beyond the party's abilities to stop the rise of political alternatives represented by the Chinese liberal camp consisting of liberal intellectuals, democrats within the party, rights lawyers, grass-roots rights activists, democracy movement leaders and liberal Christians. With the Internet as an alternative national organisation for coordination, they have taken many coordinated collective actions, including publishing and disseminating *Charter 08* and other online petitions to call for an end to the communist monopoly on power and provide the rights defence movement with a blueprint for constitutional democracy (Feng 2012: 119–139, 2010). Every effort has been made by the security apparatus to eliminate any groups which appear to challenge the legitimacy claim of the CCP, but the party-state has failed to defeat the challenge posed by the Falungong and Christian house churches. Both have become sustained movements of popular opposition or civil disobedience with claimed membership levels of over 70 million each.

At the theoretical level, the legitimacy claim of the Chinese communist regime reveals the complexity in identifying sources and criteria of legitimacy. Weber's classic threefold legitimacy sources of charisma,

rationality (legality) and tradition have now expanded to include many new sources such as social order, justice, procedural fairness, national security, general welfare, accountability, efficiency and economic growth (Gilley 2009: 30). Furthermore, different schools of thought lay different emphases on these diverse sources of legitimacy, such as social and cultural conditions (sociological approach), economic growth and distributive fairness (developmental approach), state capacity (bureaucracy school) and democracy and human rights (liberal school).

The underlying reason that the system of stability preservation has contributed to further eroding the legitimacy of the Chinese communist rule established through violent revolution is the rise of rights and democracy consciousness among the population and the hegemony of democratic legitimacy in the contemporary world. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law have now become genuine universal values accepted by the Chinese thinking public, who believe that government legitimacy is based on the free, fair and regular election of legislative and executive power-holders. Commitment to political reform in expanding democratic participation, marching toward the rule of law, enhancing public supervision over the state bureaucracy and effectively protecting human rights are essential for the legitimacy claim of the CCP in the reform era. By blocking meaningful political reform toward democracy, dismissing the rule of law as a viable institutional mechanism to ensure social stability and rejecting democratic processes and procedural justice, China's system of stability preservation undermines the key sources of its regime legitimacy.

In conclusion, the policy and institutions of preserving stability in contemporary China are counterproductive. They have infringed on the rights and legitimate interests of the people and themselves become the causes of social and political instability, plunging China into a vicious circle, where “more efforts to preserve stability are responded to by worsening instability” (越维稳越不稳, *yue weiwen yue buwen*). These institutions and policies have undermined legal institutions and judicial justice, derailed legal reform, compromised the universal values of human rights and democracy and undercut the vital sources of regime legitimacy. One challenge facing the new Chinese leadership is that China cannot move forward in social and political developments, in particular to renew regime legitimacy through democratic election, without abandoning the current policy and system of stability preservation.

The five articles in this topical issue are selected from papers first presented at the Preserving Stability Conference initiated by David Kelly and organised by the China Research Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney, in July 2011. More than 20 conference participants contributed generously to the discussion and revision of these articles.

Feng Chongyi's article provides an overview of the political order of stability preservation in contemporary China. It traces the origins of the discourse, policy and practice of preserving stability, particularly the evolution of the system of stability preservation and its interplay with the rights defence movement. The article examines the end and the means of stability preservation, pointing out that the stability discourse and the additional administrative institutions of stability preservation are extraordinary measures taken by the Chinese communist regime to arrest the trend of democratic change and perpetuate communist rule after the global collapse of communism. The Chinese population and the Chinese government differ greatly in their focus and approach with regard to social stability. Whereas the major concern of the government is regime survival, the population is yearning for a new order where society is free of unrest, the government exercises power with popular consent, social order is preserved through positive interactions between the government and the population, human rights are guaranteed and citizens enjoy a peaceful life and equal opportunities to improve their living standards. The escalation of heavy-handed stability preservation measures has resulted in further social unrest due to pervasive rights violations, to which the population has responded with the rights defence movement. Feng highlights the trend that both rights defence by the Chinese population and stability preservation by the government in their current forms are approaching a dead end. The Chinese central government's policy of stability preservation has proved to be increasingly untenable, not only because of the escalating financial burden but also because stability preservation itself has become an excuse for corrupt officials to abuse power for personal gain and to eliminate any elements of the social and political progress that may ease social instability. On the other side, when citizens' demands and petitions for redressing grievances and abuses through legal processes have been met with more abuses by the government, the rights defence movement is blocked by the politics it tries to avoid.

The piece by Susan Trevaskes examines how public security authorities, central political authorities and the party rationalise the policing of

crime and protest and how they articulate the current stability situation in China in terms of handling “social contradictions” and “struggles”. The police are in the forefront of stability preservation campaigns. Coincident with Feng’s narrative, Trevaskes argues that there was a significant shift in policing priorities from “striking hard” at serious crime to “striking hard” at protests and civil dissent in 2003, when the rights defence movement emerged. With a focus on this “switch-over”, the article exposes the hypocrisy in framing “social conditions” according to Maoist dialectics of suppression and leniency in dealing with crime and elaborates on the contradiction in the state practice of stability preservation, which treats the supposedly “non-antagonistic contradictions” among the people as antagonistic contradictions between the enemy and the people. The article demonstrates that stability preservation has been articulated by the state not only as a precondition for the building of a “harmonious society” but also as a means of protecting the very future of the party’s hold on national power itself, given the intensity of social contradictions and struggles. The article ends with a suggestion that the intensity of stability-preserving operations in China is about protecting interests and that these interests are directly linked to the “struggle” between the party and groups in society that threaten its future *vis-à-vis* the future privilege and prosperity of its senior leadership.

Xie Yue’s article devotes itself to tackling the financial dimension of the stability preservation operations and provides an account and an analysis of how Chinese local cadres face a dilemma in performing their conflicting official duties under the pressure of preserving stability. Xie also takes 2003, when the Chinese government initiated a new fiscal reform, as a starting point. The Chinese government has tremendously increased its budget for domestic order and public security. However, the grass-roots governments in China have found it increasingly hard to finance their security operations. With rich statistical data and close observation, Xie demonstrates that the new funding reform catering to stability preservation has produced even heavier financial burdens, at least for the local governments in the poorer Central and Western China, among other reasons because the new funding usually engenders demands for matching investments from the local governments to complete the designated projects. The grass-roots governments have been required to keep any social unrest under control on the spot, but it is very expensive to finance intensive, widespread social control. Apart from normal expenditure for policing, additional costs include, but are

not limited to, payment for propaganda, monitoring and retrieving petitions, settling disputes and networking to eliminate the “records” of petitions with higher-level offices. Without sufficient funding from the official fiscal revenue, local governments are increasingly dependent on self-raised funds, which more often than not are generated through predatory measures such as land sales and fines. These predatory measures are likely to trigger popular protests, which, in turn, entail more expenditure to control. In other words, while the central government is pressuring the local government layer by layer to take on the growing tasks of preserving stability, the financial burden falls disproportionately on the grass-roots governments. Xie concludes that local governments in China will be weighed down unless the central government makes responsible political and legal changes to ease social and political tensions.

Maurizio Marinelli tackles the intellectual aspect of stability preservation, with a focus on the specific forms of power that are embodied in the properties and functions of formalised language, as was used by Jiang Zemin in crucial political documents on the party’s policy toward intellectuals. Embedded in discourse analysis, the article illuminates various possibilities for the normalisation and inculcation of formalised language in the understudied decade of the 1990s, when the mantra “without stability, nothing can be achieved” became a tautology. As capitalist practice by the CCP proved too difficult to reconcile with its communist ideology; the gap between the name and the reality had become unbridgeable due to the dissolution of any possible connection between political speech and reality. It came as no surprise that Jiang’s political discourse on intellectuals presented a serious ambiguity that blurred the three categories of reform, development and stability. Jiang was incapable of clarifying the precise relationship between the three categories and was at the same time deliberate in his efforts to obscure their relationship. Marinelli’s analysis also reveals the extreme involution/ devolution of the formalised language of the CCP in the Jiang Zemin era, when “preserving stability” was reaffirmed as a crucial concern of the party leadership, whose ultimate aim has been the safeguarding of its monopoly on power.

The article by David Kelly deals with a topic indirectly linked to the theme of stability preservation in assessing the ideological controversy over “universal values”. The rise to dominance of stability preservation in the political order coincided with a highly charged debate over “universal values”, and the closely related discussion of a self-styled “China model” that portrays “Western” democracy as irrelevant if not hostile.

David Kelly's essay analyses the critique of universal values as a "wedge issue" that is used to preempt criticism of the party-state by appealing to nationalism and cultural essentialism. It is telling that the universal values controversy was at its height between 2008 and 2011, when the global financial crisis strengthened belief in a putative "China model" in many official quarters, viewing China as a nation-state with its own destiny. The "China model" and "Chinese values" are promoted by the government and Chinese "New Leftists", who dismiss individual freedom and multi-party democracy as "Western" and intensify the party-state's claim to embody the fundamental national identity and its interests. Taking "freedom" as a case in point of a universal value, Kelly shows that, while it is more developed as a value "package" in the West, it has an authentic Chinese history with key watershed moments in the late Qing Dynasty with the reception of popular sovereignty, and during the high tide of Maoism that united the nation in a quest for liberation. The work of Qin Hui and Xu Jilin displays some of the resources contemporary liberals bring to these "de-wedging" universal values, not least freedom. Their common ground is their refusal to regard "Western" values as essentially incommensurate with and hostile to Chinese values, along with their clear sense of the irony involved in rejecting Western values while upholding Marxism, itself originating from Western values.

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Contents

Introduction

- **FENG Chongyi**
The Dilemma of Stability Preservation in China 3

Research Articles

- FENG Chongyi
Preserving Stability and Rights Protection: Conflict or Coherence? 21
- Susan TREVASKES
Rationalising Stability Preservation through Mao's Not So Invisible Hand 51
- XIE Yue
Rising Central Spending on Public Security and the Dilemma Facing Grassroots Officials in China 79
- Maurizio MARINELLI
Jiang Zemin's Discourse on Intellectuals: The Political Use of Formalised Language and the Conundrum of Stability 111
- David KELLY
Approaching Chinese Freedom: A Study in Absolute and Relative Values 141
- ZHANG Wu
Protest Leadership and Repertoire: A Comparative Analysis of Peasant Protest in Hunan in the 1990s 167
- Yao LI
Fragmented Authoritarianism and Protest Channels: A Case Study of Resistance to Privatizing a Hospital 195

- Contributors 225