Managed Society. Conceptualizing Stability Preservation in Authoritarian China

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You ask, why can’t they tell black from white, fact from fiction? They think they’re straight shooters, telling it like it is. You ask, why all the cover-ups? They think they’re letting it all hang out. You ask, why are they so irretrievably corrupt? They think they’re hardworking and plain-living. (Excerpt from “The Derailed Country” by Han Han)

Introduction

Driven by the expectation or even the wish that authoritarian rule might not last long, for decades, observers and analysts of non-democratic regimes have viewed these regimes as rigid and inflexible and thus their research mainly focused on the regime’s “fault lines”. While any problems – be they economic, social or political - have been happily greeted as harbinger of a coming or existing deeper going crisis and any protest has unproved been seen as demand for greater freedom or even democratic regime change, actual changes of autocratic regimes and their policies have been interpreted as mere reaction to pressure from below or from the outside and have thus been even taken as evidence for the crisis scenarios itself. Repressive means seemed to be the only realm where autocrats could be innovative.

Only in recent years, the obvious resilience of some autocratic regimes has stimulated a new kind of literature that analyzes factors of adaptability. Especially the Chinese case has provoked a new strand of research that concentrates on long time neglected strategies of autocratic regimes beyond repression that help them to stay in power. Looking for reasons of regime survival, a majority of studies, however, still elaborate on the reactions of these regimes to contentious challenges thus leading to a somehow odd gap in our understanding of China autocrats and their politics. While we have a huge and increasing variety of studies about their pro-active economic, social or foreign policy to steer China’s rise, nearly all studies of collective action and social protests in China focus on strategies of the discontent (Lee 2000; Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Lee 2005; Cai 2008d; Pils 2008; Read 2008; Cai 2009; Hurst 2009; Kernen 2009; Chan 2010; Hess 2010; Béja 2011), the characteristics of offline and online social activism (O’Brien and Li 2006; Yang 2009), or the scope of an emerging civil society (Ho and Edmonds 2008). While the Chinese authoritarian regime is considered to be relatively successful even in establishing its own development model, most studies deny that it aims to serve a broader public interest and rather state that it responds to popular pressure of

1 Based on the translation by Schrader (Han 2011).
2 This can be a risky endeavor as those allegations have shown that the researchers themselves have in the last consequence contributed to the stability of that regimes by not helping to find the cracks (Lobe 2011).
3 See the discussion about the „Beijing Consensus“, the „China Model“, or special policies like „authoritarian environmentalism“.
necessity by either expanding its tool kit of repression or involuntary improving opportunity structures for further protests (Zheng 2002; Cai 2004; 2008c; 2008b; Hess 2009; Stern and O’Brien 2011). Concessions are seen as a sign of weakness an authoritarian regime has to take refuge to when it lacks repressive power.

This article, however, argues that depending on their capacities authoritarian regimes not only re-act, but also or even predominantly act using the complete palette of concessions and repression – alternately or simultaneously (Schucher 2009) – and that they deliberately combine compensation and coercion to stay in power. Thus, on the one hand they pre-emptively “respond to popular pressures before they erupt into violent acts of social protest” (Fukuyama 2012) or might even purposely encourage protests as steam valves or tools to control local cadres (Lorentzen 2010). But on the other hand authoritarian regimes also “give citizens things that they want – in particular, security, jobs, and rising living standards” (Fukuyama 2012) making many Chinese believe that the Chinese government is acting in their best interest (Shi 2008; Shi and Lou 2010). There is of course no guarantee that an authoritarian regime provides public goods or social services – as there is no guarantee in democratic regimes either, but there is also no rule that a communist party like the Chinese one cannot be morally constrained to act in response to perceived public interest (Dreze and Sen 2011; Fukuyama 2012). If we really want to understand the mechanisms of authoritarian regime’s resilience respective survival, we have to take into account both sides of the coin: repression and compensation, pro-active “giving” and re-active responding.

The onset of China’s reform policy at the end of the 1970’s and it’s reactivation in 1992 were heavily influenced by deep-going crises of regime legitimacy after the ten years of Cultural Revolutionary chaos and the Tiananmen square protests in 1989, but the reforms instigated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were primarily meant to follow Deng Xiaoping’s vision of the “Four Modernizations”. The economic and social transformations set in motion by these reforms involved a fundamental redefinition of the social contract the Chinese government has with society (Tang and Parish 2000) – a process that is still going on. After a decade of double-digit growth the party-state leadership under general secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao worked out their concept of a “harmonious society”. And at the end of their term they presented a concept of “social management” that aims to create new forms of inclusive social development as well as improved institutions of social control: strengthened self-management at the lowest administrative level, development of service functions of neighborhood committees, development of social organizations to represent the public’s interests, improved communication channels between the party-state and the public, improved risk management, modernization of public security work and the like.

These concepts are neither genuine inventions nor pure derivations from the guiding ideology. They are developed with reference to societal developments, based on the CCP’s ideological heritage and revolutionary record, and cross-checked with current domestic and international experiences. In the following, we will first elaborate on the development process of these concepts, then we will describe these concepts in more detail and finally we will exemplify our argument by analyzing some recent contentious episodes.

The Challenge to Manage Society

Deng’s reforms of the economic system fundamentally altered all aspects of China’s socioeconomic conditions. This unprecedented social transformation was driven by the gradual transition from a centrally planned system to an open market system starting with the decollectivization of agriculture, the improvement of the governance of state-owned enterprises, and the promotion of non-state enterprises. The shift of labor out of agriculture
and into industry and services was facilitated by a developing labor market and the erosion of the *danwei*- (work unit-) system that had allowed for complete social control in exchange for social security from cradle to grave. Rapid economic growth has been characterized by industrialization, privatization, commoditization of labor, increasing population mobility, urbanization, improving levels of people’s material life, emergence of new social strata, individualization, and so on.

Particularly decollectivization and the end of the urban *danwei*- system altered individual-society as well as society-state relations in a profound way (Zhu 1993; Bray 2005; Yan 2009; Hansen and Sververud 2010; Li 2010; Yan 2010a; 2010b; Alpermann 2011). Due to disembedment from external social constraints as well as liberalization from “the family, community, work place and ultimately the state” (Yan 2009) the Chinese individual is now not only able to find his or her own ways of self-development in a new social setting, but is also forced to do so because of its loss of traditional security. Gaining more weight in society the individual became an important social category for policy making. Searching for identity “the individual has begun to link the self with a set of rights” (Yan 2009; 2010a) increasingly resorting to the form of contentious appeals to the party-state, offline and online (O’Brien and Li 2006; Yang 2009). Aside from these rather spontaneous and episodic forms of sociality, new types of interactions among previously unrelated individuals have developed ranging from online communities to volunteerism (Rolandsen 2010) and non-governmental organizations (Ho 2007; Salmenkari 2008; Spires 2011).

Quite different to individualization processes in Western Europe, this process in China “does give the individual more mobility, choice and freedom, but it does so with little institutional protection and support from the state”, thus forcing the Chinese individual “to fall back on the family and personal network or *guanxi*” (Yan 2009). Achieved at the expense of the previous socialist welfare system and increasing social inequality, of severe environmental degradation, loss of farmland, lack of social and educational justice, to name just a few, social and economic transformation prompted the Chinese people to redefine the individual-group-institution relationship and to claim individual rights. The spectrum of social action includes redistribution, recognition, and representation: struggles and claims for material interests, the articulation of needs previously denied or ignored, and the expression of ideas and symbols (Yang 2009; Lee and Hsing 2010).

In the course of economic reforms, the party-state first began to recognize the private sphere, later it began to acknowledge the existence of a social sphere (Salmenkari 2011). Faced with the untying of the Chinese individual and a pluralizing society (Li 2005) the party-state began to search for new forms of re-embedment. Old forms of social engineering like party-state mobilized social movements and ideological imposition had lost its appeal — although some “old” and “new lefts” still cling to them. But as the party-state itself – at least to a large extent - has promoted the disembedment, it is without a doubt also willing to further manage the interplay between the different players (the individual, the market, social groups, institutions). While it promotes and even supports a certain degree of self-management in economic and private life as well as some selected domains of public life, it wants individuals to stay within the boundaries drawn by be party-state and makes every effort to prevent individualistic claims of political rights (Yan 2009). While it recognizes the existence of economic and social interest conflicts and more or less tolerates rights-defending actions, there is no tolerance for collective rights-demanding actions.

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4 Chan values conflicts as a precondition of a new class building process (Chan 2010).
To sum up, the party-state’s strategy to pursue modernity has included a process of managed individualization. While on the one hand “the party-state retreated and openly recognized the legitimacy of individual desires and interests”, individuals on the other hand have “gained more awareness of entitlements and rights” and have taken “proactive actions in the form of identity politics and a rights movement” (Yan 2010a). The party-state has to handle this “citizen activism” (Yang 2009) and to listen to public opinion, but its main focus is to redefine its concept and tools of social management (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: The transformation-management-activism-triangular**

Göbel argues that many propositions to explain the different patterns of regime persistence focus on overly narrow understandings of power. In order to reduce the costs of applying coercive means the ruling elite also enhances its capacities to govern society by building up infrastructural power (power inherent in regulating society through institutions and organizations) and discursive power (power to make people want what the government wants them to want). “Positive consolidation denotes genuine legitimisation by elites and the general population alike” (Göbel, et al. 2010; Göbel 2011). Legitimacy, as Zhu states, “may simply mean the ‘rightfulness’ of authority through an explicit display of social support.” China’s governing policy is first and foremost designed to „convince the Chinese people that the government is doing the right things and therefore has the right to rule” (Zhu 2011). The previous Party Secretary Jiang Zeming promulgated the “Three Represents” (sange daibiao) theory to expand the party’s representativeness; to raise its capacities as a service oriented government the CCP, in 2004, passed an important resolution to strengthen its governance ability (Zeng 2005); and the Hu-Wen-team reached out for more inclusive representation by taking a people-centered approach (yimin weiben). In 2005, Hu Jintao tied these and other elements up to the concept of a harmonious society (hexie shehui) (Hu 2005; CCP 2006).

At the end of 2009, Hu gave an urgent warning to the whole party that the contradictions within the society would grow more acute in the next three years up to the coming party congress and the leadership change in 2012. More than ever it would be necessary to nip possible conflicts in the bud or – at least – handle them immediately and actively after outbreak (Luo 2010). One year later, he gave a series of lessons and presented his ideas of “social management” (shehui guanli) in greater detail. The concept found its way into the 12th Five-year-program (2011-2015) (NPC 2011).

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5 Göbel (2010) refers to costs „in terms of domestic and international legitimacy”, but there are also financial costs worth to reduce.
Facing a constantly changing society this concept, however, is always “unfinished business” as Zhu has exemplified with reference to the CCP’s legitimation strategy (Zhu 2011). While mismanagement is ever more noticeable to the people (and often publicly debated in the new social media), (re-)calibrating the “right” mix of concessions and coercion, of compensation and repression remains to be a constant challenge in the face of rising public discontent. Reforms in one area of state management might affect performances in other areas; increasing transparency (e-government) and opening space for society’s involvement (citizens’ supervision and participation) for example may further rising awareness about rules and rights. Interactions between society and state are dynamic and intensified, “reflecting the pluralistic social interests and demands which may be inconsistent with government interests” (Zhu 2011).

To develop its social management concepts the Chinese leadership has made use of manifold resources. It increasingly relies on think-tanks and intellectual elite. Study sessions, field research, or investigation teams are only some means to garner information and experiences. “Maximum tinkering” and “local experiments” are special features of China’s distinctive policy process (Heilmann 2008; 2009). Openly addressing the problems of economic and social development and even of popular contention the leadership widened the discursive space in China and encouraged a wide range of intellectual contributions it may draw on. An essential component of this endeavor is the evaluation of China’s historical (mainly revolutionary) experiences as well as of other countries’ history and the constant observation and analysis of contentious episodes in China as well as in other parts of the world.

Heilmann and Perry trace the authoritarian regime’s increasing ability to manage “tricky challenges” and to survive serious unanticipated crises to distinctive governance methods “shaped by the Chinese Communists’ own revolutionary and post-revolutionary past and, during the post-Mao era, complemented by selective borrowing from ‘advanced’ foreign organizational and regulatory practices”. China’s “guerilla-style policy-making” approach has proven “capable of generating an array of creative – proactive as well as evasive – tactics for managing sudden change and uncertainty”. The foundation of adaptability is “response diversity: a variety of reactive, digestive, pre-emptive, and proactive operations and procedures that facilitate continual adjustment to and absorption of endogenous and exogenous challenges” (Heilmann and Perry 2011). Shambaugh gives an overview of the internal Chinese analyses of the reasons for other regimes’ and party-states’ collapse or sustenance used by the CCP in its attempt “to reinvent, rescue, and re-legitimate the party-state” (Shambaugh 2008).6

This article will exemplify this by referring to the Chinese conclusions drawn from the riots in Nottingham/London in August 2011. It will further present some anecdotal evidence that different components of the social management concept are time and again recalibrated based on new experiences from contentious episodes. The Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee (CCP CC) highlighted this as one precondition among others to construct “learning-oriented Party organizations”. In addition to “the solution of serious problems concerning the reform, development and stability” party organizations have to learn from and carry out “theoretically innovative accomplishments”, have to improve and attend to studies, and should create a strong atmosphere where party organizations learn from each other and “everyone learns all his life” (CPC CC 2011).

6 After the relaxation in the Taiwan Strait delegations of the mainland’s security apparatus studied and discussed with their Taiwanese counterparts the handling of protests during Taiwan’s authoritarian regime. Personal information, Taipei, Oct 2011.
“Diffusion and learning operate not only from below”, as Heydemann and Leenders have argued. Regime strategies “should be seen as complex, multilevel games involving regimes, publics, and external actors, in which regimes develop strategies that aim to affect the strategic calculus of citizens, allies, and adversaries, even while constantly updating their own probabilities” (Heydemann and Leenders 2011). These processes of observing, analyzing, learning and adapting, however, are by no way consensual, undisputed, showing commonly shared results. Firstly, learning processes are shaped by prevailing ideas, concepts and aims. Secondly, conclusions might be disputed between different party coalitions like populists and elitists (Li 2012a) and different intellectual groupings like the liberal, new left and old left (He 2010; Freeman III and Wen 2011). Thirdly, party organizations at different administrative levels might draw different conclusions. Fourthly, not every cadre wants to learn or is able to learn. Chestnut elaborating on China’s ethnic minority policy as a field of authoritarian learning points at the related skills of Chinese leaders and at the necessity to include “voluntarist explanations” in the debate on authoritarian stability (Chestnut 2010). And Shambaugh concludes that the lessons Chinese analyses derived from other authoritarian regimes’ development have been “remarkably eclectic” (Shambaugh 2011).

Thus, collective learning processes might be protracted discussion processes as well as processes to transmit the concepts down to even the lowest level of the party-state. We know from the formulation process of the Party Secretary’s report to the party congress or the development of the five-year-programs that these essential papers take more than two years and many rounds of discussion and consultation till there finalization. Some even say that these processes involving the leading cadres in the center and the provinces, in the party and the governments, in ministries, committees and mass organizations are more important than the result itself. Nevertheless, by the time of their first public presentation the programs and concepts represent the consensus or at least the common denominator of the factions and coalitions within the different echelons of the party. This, however, does not mean that these programs will be unanimously implemented without modification. They are as well “unfinished business” as the concepts for social management we will turn to in the next chapter.

**Concepts to Manage the Chinese Society**

To understand the policy of the Hu-Wen-team we have to distinguish liberalization from democratization. The first stands for a political process, when authoritarian leaders untighten political control without any intention to commence democratic transition. In any case, the modification and relaxation of authoritarian rules are meant to preserve the core of their power and to strengthen public support of their rule, although the extension of individual and group rights may also offer new or more opportunities for collective action (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Dalpino 2000). In this sense, liberalization “is best conceived as a process of transforming relationships – among members of the regime, between the regime and state, the state and society, the people and their rulers, and even among everyday citizens – that stops short of comprehensive institutional reform” (Dalpino 2000). Political liberalization emanates from the regime itself and is not always easy to detect. It often begins with tacit tolerance and no-objection, but can also be official policy.

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7 Moreover, authoritarian regimes do not only learn to liberalize to stay in power as Heydemann and Leenders state, they may also draw the opposite conclusion and abdicate liberalization (Diamond 2006).
8 See the above excerpt of a assumed post of Han Han, China’s celebrity blogger.
The variety of participatory and deliberative practices of the CCP is explained by He and Warren, who refer to the phenomenon as “authoritarian deliberation” (He and Warren 2008; 2011). Their focus is in line with that of many other China scholars who have recently turned to issues of resilience and adaptability of the Chinese regime (Gilley 2003; Nathan 2003; Heberer and Schubert 2006; Schubert 2008; Nathan 2009; Holbig and Gilley 2010). Particularly noteworthy is that they do not necessarily conclude a “softening” of authoritarian rule (Baum 2004; 2007), but rather stress the possible trajectory that the increasing use of deliberative practices stabilizes and strengthens it.

Aside from the generation of legitimacy He and Warren specify five functional reasons why the Chinese regime might use deliberative mechanisms: they can (1) co-opt dissent and maintain social order, (2) generate information about society and policy helping to avoid mistakes in governing, (3) provide forums for and exchanges with business, (4) increase transparency and enhance trust in officials, and (5) enable leaders to deflect responsibility and avoid blame (He and Warren 2011). Typical are the limitation authoritarian deliberation sets to citizens’ capacities to put issues onto the political agenda. By channelling political participation into the domains of administrative decision-making, the economy, and the judiciary – the “governance level” political participation, as the authors call it – the CCP seeks to prevent political participation at what might be called the “regime level” where autonomous public spheres could be produced (He and Warren 2011). These limited forms of voice and governance-focused empowerments have forced discontent to increasingly resort to unconventional forms of participation. To recognize, channel, and possibly prevent these unconventional forms is one element of the concept of a “harmonious society”, that Hu presented in 2005 and the CCP CC agreed on in October 2006 (Hu 2005; CCP 2006).

The resolution as of Oct 11, 2006 is the first official document of the CCP that weighs in on the issue of unconventional participation, so called “mass incidents” (quntixing shijian). By using this rather odd expression the party first and foremost recognized that the articulation of interests and lodging of complaints are no hostile actions instigated by external forces, but rather unavoidable in times of domestically produced social contradictions. It thus, among others, opened discursive space for research and debates on the causes of these incidents and the ways to handle them.9

On February 19, 2005 Hu Jintao explained the new concept in detail at a special discussion class for principal leading cadres at provincial and ministerial level at the central party school in Beijing (Hu 2005). Building a harmonious socialist society is something the party “must do” to achieve its “grand objective of building an all-round well-off society”. Reforms and development are in a “crucial period” and the party has to seize and take advantage of this period’s “strategic opportunities”, while it has to avoid the “critical stage” other countries and regions have entered in the course of economic and social development (Hu refers to the “middle income trap”). At this stage, erratic measures may result in “failures, such as economic stagnation and protracted social upheavals”.10 Along with its economic and social development the problems and contradictions China will unavoidable face for a long time “will quite likely be even more complex and conspicuous”.

9 I would like to thank Christoph Steinhardt for this information who wrote his PhD-thesis on “The Evolution of Political Discourse on Popular Protest in Contemporary China”: A simple search for the term “quntixing shijian” in the databases of Renmin Ribao (RMRB) and China Academic Journals displays a remarkable increase of its notion in journal articles from 270 in 2005 to 1300 in 2011 and in RMRB from 44 to 136 during the same period. In the meantime publications on “quntixing shijian” or “tufa shijian” (sudden-breaking incidents) abound - as do publications on “shehui guanli” (social management) during the last two years.

10 Here and in the following quote italics by the author.
New trends and features in China’s development process are, among others, uneven urban-rural and regional developments, uneven economic and social development, growing and increasingly diverse material and cultural needs of the people, increasingly complex interests in different social sectors, as well as the people’s heightening awareness of democracy and law and growing enthusiasm for political participation. The party “must correctly understand and properly handle the contradictions among the people and other social contradictions, coordinate the interests of people in various sectors”. Building a harmonious socialist society “is an ongoing process of properly handling all types of contradictions”.

At least four aspects in Hu’s speech attract attention. First, he acts on the assumption that contradictions cannot totally be avoided when the Chinese society is undergoing profound changes; second, these contradictions will pile up for a long time; third, Hu does rarely speak of the “resolution” of these problems, but more of their “handling” and “coordination”, of the “removing of inharmonious factors and increasing harmonious factors”; and fourth, he intentionally draws on the Chinese history of political thoughts (Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, Li Ji, Kang Youwei), on Marxist-Leninist ideas, and prominently on the CCP’s revolutionary heritage. The blueprint for the handling of relationships in the Chinese society was presented by Mao Zedong’s in his speech “On the issue of correctly handling the contradictions among the people”, published in 1957 (Schoenhals 1986). According to Hu, the importance of this theory discerning “contradiction among the people” (renmin neibu maodun) from those “between the enemy and ourselves” has been stated anew by Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and the 16th National Party Congress.

While Hu requests the party to improve its governing capacity, “broaden the avenues through which people can report society’s situations and their views”, and to learn from Mao “how to use democratic ways to resolve the contradictions among the people – including using the policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend” he explicitly assumes that open protests, i.e. “mass incidents” will occur. Thus, when the party cannot stop those behaviors that infringe on the masses’ interests it has to guide the masses to express their requests and resolve their contradictions reasonably and lawfully. Group incidents have to be actively prevented and properly handled according to law and policy.

When no society is without contradictions and the principal contradiction of the Chinese society for a long time will be that between the growing needs of the people and the backwardness of social production, the people are entitled to submit their vital interests (unlike hostile forces who jeopardize social stability), particularly when “some leading cadres still cannot meet the requirements of the new situation” (CCP 2006). In line with this differentiated understanding of public activities directives of the State Council have repeatedly stated that only those mass incidents are destructive and intolerable that aim to topple the political system, to endanger China’s territorial integrity, to attack public authorities, or to destroy important infrastructure. Assessment has to account for political requests, organized violence, purposeful confrontation, and support from abroad. All other peaceful collective actions carrying legitimate requests should be handled without the use of force (Cai 2008b).

Although socialist democracy and the rule of law are mentioned as fundamental principle of administering the country, the CCP’s approach to build up harmony is top-down. Everyone bears his share of responsibility, but only “under the leadership of the party”. This also holds for the still quite unspecific ideas to improve “social management” (shehui guanli) and maintain stability and the order of society the party’s resolution listed in chapter six. Here it demands more service-oriented government (including more openness of government affairs),
the building of communities and improved services at the grassroots level, strengthened functions of social organizations, broadened channels of communication for people, an improved emergency management system, and enhanced national security (CCP 2006).

In late 2010, when the formulation of the 12th Five-year-program approached the final stretch, the concept of social management gained new prominence. One year before Hu Jintao had urgently warned the whole party, that social contradictions might grow more acute within the following three years until the coming party congress and leadership change in 2012. The party should do everything to nip seething conflicts in the bud or should at least be prepared to actively tackle and control disruptive actions (Luo 2010).

These warning notices about an increasingly complex domestic situation, a marked increase in social contradictions as well as many foreseeable and unforeseeable risks and challenges has expanded into the Five-year-program as has the concept of “social management” (NPC 2011). Since September 2010, Hu has presented his upgraded and more fleshed out ideas during a series of at least three study sessions for the Politburo members and provincial leaders. To reduce this concept to the aspect of refined repression as many commentators did alluding to the “big chill” in the wake of Arabellion and internet calls for a “Jasmine Revolution” in Beijing (Lam 2011a) would mean to turn a blind eye to its broader approach to recalibrate the relationship between the party-state and society.

Party and government, Hu summoned his colleagues, should take a more proactive approach to address social conflicts speeding up social construction, safeguarding people’s interests and rights, improving public services, promoting scientific and democratic decision-making, and listening more to the voice and complaints of the public (Hu 2010). He particularly elaborated on these guidelines during the opening ceremony of a special study session at the Central Party School from February 19 to 23, 2011, and at a politburo meeting on May 30, 2011 (Hu 2011a; 2011b): “The basic tasks of social management include coordinating social relationships, standardizing social behaviors, resolving social contradictions, promoting social fairness, dealing with social risks and dangers and maintaining social stability. Doing a good job in social management and promoting social harmony are basic conditions for building a well-off society in an all-round way and adhering to and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Hu 2011a). Hu is convinced that “there are still many areas where our country’s concepts, ideas, structures, mechanisms, laws, policies, methods, and means for social management have yet to adapt to changes in the actual circumstances” (Hu 2011b) and he wants to involve the public, but in a top-down manner: “with the leadership of the party committee, the responsibility of the government, the cooperation of the society and the participation of the public” (Hu 2011a).

Social management covers more than the improvement of the security apparatus, as not only the following points in the extra chapter of the Five-year-program reveal (NPC 2011), but also other Politburo members like Zhou Yongkang, responsible for security issues, or the designated next Party Secretary Xi Jinping affirmed (Xi 2011; Zhou 2011b):

- Innovation of the structures and mechanisms of social management. While party committees and governments cleave to the “leading role”, mass organizations, self-governing grassroots organizations and social organizations should be mobilized to
participate. By digging deep into the sources of social problems their occurrence should be prevented and reduced.

- Delegation of responsibilities to lower level governments and improvement of the system of community level self-governance.
- Promoting the development of social organizations and strengthening the supervision of social organizations by law, governments, public and self-monitoring.
- Improving communication between society and party-state by expanding the channels for reporting on social conditions and popular sentiments - including the better implementation of the petition mechanism, a greater role of people’s organizations and mass media in reflecting people’s interests and an improved use of the internet in communicating public opinions.
- Establishing a social stability risk review mechanism for important projects and policies and improving mechanisms to actively detect, prevent, mediate and resolve disputes and conflicts.
- Development and modernization of the system of public security combining active prevention and control, e.g. of food and drug or work safety, as well as contingency response.
- Contingency management includes the strengthening of the lower level administrative capabilities for urban-rural community policing, building of a national population basic database, enhanced intelligence information collection and the combination of crackdown and prevention, “focusing on prevention”.

Even this brief account paraphrased in the party’s language shows that the upgraded concept of social management aims at improvements in at least four realms: the early detection of social problems, the involvement of social organizations, delegation of responsibilities to lower level governments, and improved community level self-governance.

(1) Being aware of the expanding and intensifying interest conflicts and an ever more rights conscious population the party-state searches for various ways to detect social problems as early as possible and to resolve them in a “timely manner”. Reforms to improve crisis detection have been on the wish list of Chinese social scientists and critical public intellectuals for quite some time. So far, they admonished, social management only started after the emergence of problems and rather resembled “crisis management” than “good governance”. Government agencies are not able to properly judge the real degree of danger in certain situations. Scholars of the Jiaotong University in Shanghai analyzed, that in 67 of 72 “public crises” social media were the first that reported, in one third of the cases on the same day (Wang 2011b). To have its ears as closest to the ground as possible, the party-state encourages mass media to express social interests and recognizes the Internet as a new channel to communicate public opinion. Investigative journalism and political debates in internet fora and in the new social media have indeed been on the increase for some time (Lagerkvist 2005; Wang 2011d; Zhu, et al. 2012), and Hu and Wen have time and again called the government agencies to better listen to public opinion – synchronized with efforts to

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11 “Social organizations” (shehui zuzhi) are separated into three major categories: social organizations (shehui tuanti) as membership associations like trade and professional associations; civil non-enterprise institutions (minban fei qiye danwei) like registered NGOs; and foundations (jijinhui).
12 These crises particularly refer problems related to the „rule of law“ (18%), catastrophes and accidents (15.3%), and corruption.
improve control and to embrace social media by government and party agencies. While tolerance to the public expression of interests and opinions remains selective depending on content and targets (Zheng and Wu 2005; MacKinnon 2009), the final aims is to “channel” public opinion, what Bandurski termed Control 2.0 (Bandurski 2009).

(2) Because of the rapid socio-economic transformation of urban and rural China the Chinese government has lacked behind in providing social services or even failed to meet the demand. To compensate for that the party-state not only acknowledges the role of social organizations, but also wants to guide and even support them to increase their capacity to serve the society and provide social services. Chinese scholars have repeatedly pointed at the role of social organizations to re-embed the Chinese people (Li 2010; Yu 2011b). Particularly Yu Keping advocates a “new understanding of civil society” and judges the appreciation of social organizations by the social management concept as substantial progress. He is aware, however, of a still constractive institutional environment (Yu 2011b; 2011a). The concept itself gives priority to “organizations focusing on economic development and public charity, private non-enterprise organizations and urban and rural community’s organizations” (NPC 2011). While narrowing support to certain NGOs, it particularly stresses the role of government-organized NGOs like trade unions, Communist Youth leagues and women’s federations referring to the traditional concept of “mass work” – vice-president Xi Jinping elaborated on that in his speech at the study session in February 2011 (Xi 2011). Moreover, the easing of registration for local and charity organizations should be combined with “unified” registration and improved supervision. „Civic organizations are equated with umbilical cords connecting the masses and the government” (Salmenkari 2011). Zhou Benshun, general secretary of the party’s Political and Legislative Affairs Commission, warned the whole party to walk into “the West’s trap of ‘civil society’”. Instead of that, it should rather stop the growth of groups with “evil motives” and learn from abroad to pick up information on the populace by most advanced methods (Zhou 2011a). The new concept actually also includes the creation of a nationwide population basic database (with entries made by tax and traffic agencies) and an improved system of ID-cards.

(3) The party-state wants local governments to take more responsibility. To forestall the need for intervention from higher levels of government lower level governments should “take the demands of residents as their guide” and comprehensively implement the whole range of state policies. One important channel to collect public opinion and feedback is the petition working mechanism that has been pronounced and expanded right from the start of the Hu-Wen-leadership (Li, et al. 2010). Local leading cadres have been repeatedly required to take this mechanism seriously, receive visits and handle petitions, not at least by the revised petition law as of 2005 (Minzner 2006). The importance the central leadership attaches to petitions was demonstrated only recently by the first visit of a Chinese Premier with petitioners in Beijing since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and a likewise rare visit to China’s top complaints-hearing department, the State Bureau for Letters and Calls (CD 2011b). The central leadership itself, however, as Minzner convincingly demonstrates, has thwarted its own intention by the system of cadre evaluation it has installed. The managing of local cadres „by numbers” (i.e., the sheer number of petitioners having made their way to Beijing) resulted in the focus on suppression and cover-ups instead of using the petitions as expression of discontent (Minzner 2009; Wang 2009).

(4) The Chinese leadership regards community (shequ) building as a way to create social cohesion and public responsibility. The concept of “community” is certainly not a new one - it has been used by Chinese sociologists already in the 1930s, but is has been transformed into a specific institutional model only in the last decade. It is meant to take over social functions
from the work unit, thus becoming a very specific form of grassroots organization to re-incorporate the urban population, to widen the scope of social services provide as well as the target population, and to provide them in a more efficient way (Bray 2006; Li 2008). By linking public participation and social organizations to community development, however, the party-state links them to government rather than to promote a kind of civil society. The aim, Salmenkari argues, is not to express various opinions, but to find consensus, it is not to teach the people skills for collective organization, but let them learn a better use of the administrative system – “decentralization without empowerment”. In combination with the delegation of social service production to communities and social organizations this not only relieves the state from many of its former responsibilities, but also makes services available to more people resulting in increased satisfaction with the regime (Salmenkari 2011).

The recent upgrade of China’s social management concept as this discussion shows brings together two aspects: the recognition of societal change and the acknowledgement of new societal needs on the one hand as well as the improvement of the control system on the other – or in the words of the five-year-program: “a socialist social management system with Chinese characteristics to ensures that the society is as well full of vitality as harmonious and stable” (NPC 2011). We cannot fully comprehend Chinese authoritarianism by focusing on the repressive apparatus only (Lam 2011a), but we would get a wrong image also by turning a blind eye to repression and confine ourselves to liberalization. Social management remains a top-down approach, managed by a party that claims to have a “scientific development approach”. It accepts that there is dissatisfaction, but it wants to direct its expression through acceptable channels. While the idea of self-governance (zizhi) runs through the documents about social management as a quite strong idea, Bray suggests, that because of its limitation to work within the operational parameters established by government authorities it may be more useful to think of zizhi as “governing the self”.

Learning from Contentious Episodes

Of course we do not know how many open protests have been prevented by recourse to the new concept of social management. Quite on the contrary, information about contention suffers from a “confrontation bias”, since mainly those protests find their way into the media that have grown to larger extent and have reached a higher stage of escalation and confrontation.13 Based on that information and further fieldwork, we know, however, that the common assumption of Western media that the usual answer to protests would be repression only is not true. First, the actual use of repressive means (or censorship in social media) depends on many different factors like size, content, target, or the administrative level, region and so on (MacKinnon 2009). Second, it is much less costly and easier to handle for the party-state to use “mixed signals” (Stern and O’Brien 2011). Third, to a large extent protests are solved with money (Lee and Zhang 2010). Fourth, particularly larger and rather confrontational protests attract the intervention of higher levels and have thus been solved by concessions (Cai 2008b; 2008a; Chen 2009). Fifth, there is ample anecdotic evidence that the Chinese leadership has been learning from contentious episodes.

One of the most commented cases is that of Sun Zhigang, a “misrecognized” migrant worker whose death in police custody in April 2003 sparked a public outcry, leveraged a wave of media coverage, and provided ground for the first observed e-movement. Public pressure eventually prompted China’s State Council to dismantle the controversial form of

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13 The problem of „mute witnesses“ is expounded in Nassim Taleb’s philosophic essay on the “Black Swan” phenomenon.
administrative detention called “custody and repatriation” (Yu 2006; Liang 2011b). “The modest legal reforms achieved in the Sun Zhigang incident ... demonstrated that they [legal reformers] could make use of space in China’s authoritarian system to maintain a modest pace of legal change” (Hand 2006).

Another, though minor example is the nationwide strikes of taxi drivers in 2008, probably the so far biggest strike wave in modern China. It is remarkable because of two reasons: First, the early and quite open coverage by Chinese media, in all likelihood due to Hu’s repeated calls for more openness in 2007 and June 2008 (FAZ, 23.1.2008; Time online, 4.7.2008); and second, the early intervention of leading cadres like Chongqing’s Party Secretary Bo Xilai, a Politburo member, who talked to the taxi drivers publicly broadcasted by TV and diffused by the internet. Bo’s negotiations with the discontented gave an example of a de-escalation strategy legitimized by the center that subsequently was emulated by leading cadres in other strike bounded cities - labeled by Hess as an example of authoritarian deliberation (Hess 2009).

In retrospective, the year 2011 may be kept in mind for the CCP’s fierce struggle with “public opinion”. The year saw several major crises of public opinion as well as the largest e-movement in China so far and not only after the deadly bullet train crash in July “the government’s actual attitude and management of the crisis ran contrary to public opinion” as an editorial in Global Times concluded. Only government handling of the Wukan protest in late 2011 won some applause. The editorial dunned that “such tests of public opinion will happen again” and that authorities should adapt to change and face up to public opinion.

“Today, government behavior and interaction with the public have seen profound changes. These changes largely stem from public criticism ... (that) is growing increasingly sharp” (GT 2011c). Only recently, Global Times has resumed the issue against the background of “many problems within China’s ruling party and its systems”. It identified the growing influence of public opinion and flourishing criticism brought about by the internet on “the way the country functions” to be “completely new in China’s political dynamics”. Insinuating different attitudes at grassroots and higher levels, the editorial asked for a right sense for and proper management of the newly emerging public opinion to convert it into “a positive motivating force for China’s future reforms” (GT 2012). In the following, we will analyze the handling of the two biggest crises in July and September-December 2011 (Wenzhou 723 and Wukan) to see whether and how the leadership has adapted to the profound changes. Additionally we will take a brief look at the comments on the riots in Nottingham/London in August the same year as an example of learning from conflicts abroad.

Wenzhou 723 and the Channeling of Public Opinion

On July 23, 2011, around 8:30 p.m., high-speed train D3115 travelling along China’s Eastern coast from the city of Hangzhou to Fuzhou came to a halt over a viaduct near the city of Wenzhou. Shortly after, high-speed train D301, also travelling to Fuzhou from Beijing, crashed into its rear end. Due to the force of the collision, two coaches of the first train and four coaches of the second train derailed and a total of four cars fell off the viaduct, killing 39 and injuring around 200 passengers. Minutes later, a message posted on Sina Weibo by user

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14 This includes the rather surprising use of the term “strike” (bayun) instead of “mass incidents”.

15 Global Times is a daily Chinese paper under the auspices of the Renmin Ribao, owned by the CCP. Although the paper’s opinion pieces are not necessarily tantamount with the leadership’s policy, they provide strong indications.

@yangjuanquanyang started receiving a lot of attention: “Help! Train D301 has just derailed not far from Wenzhou South Station! Children are crying all over the train car! Not a single attendant to be seen! Come help us fast!” (own transl.). Within another few minutes, staff at Sina Weibo had set up a page devoted to the train crash, and within ten hours the message had been reposted more than 100,000 times and received more than 18,000 comments (Li 2011; Shank and Wasserstrom 2011; Wines and LaFraniere 2011; XH 2011c).

The tsunami of anger that flooded the Chinese Web after the Wenzhou train crash was the hiatus of a long line of public doubts and anger about China’s massive high-speed rail (HSR) program, safety problems, and corruption in the Ministry of Railways (MOR). Moreover, it touched an essential nerve of the regime, since the HSR had been praised as a symbol of the “Chinese dream”, “a miracle on earth created by the Chinese people”, and had been closely concatenated with the CCP’s pursuit of legitimacy. The high speed trains were named “Harmony” (hexie) – the denominator of General Secretary Hu Jintao’s ideological core concept of a “Harmonious Socialist Society” and the prestigious Beijing-Shanghai line was finished ahead of schedule to go into service on July 1 as a gift to the Party on its 90th anniversary and the embodiment of Hu Jintao’s “Scientific Development” concept (his second ideological core concept).

The MOR under former minister Liu Zhijun (2003-2011) had rushed ahead in the implementation of the HSR project with unprecedented speed that was soon criticized as “excessive” by a research team of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Yue 2011), as a “goal-driven culture at all stages of project delivery” (Scales, et al. 2012) and an authoritarian, “techno-nationalist” development model (Schiller 2011) comparable only to the “Great Leap Forward” during the Mao era (Yue 2011). When in April a ten-day nationwide railway safety check allegedly found the safety situation along railway lines to be “severe” (Xin 2011), president Hu urged officials to “make all efforts to guarantee its safety”. Nevertheless, shortly after the opening of the Beijing-Shanghai track on July 1, daily malfunctions and delays (partly attributed to thunderstorms in state media) – together with poor public relations on the part of the MOR – started to irritate passengers (Bandurski 2011e). Throughout July, the weeks leading up to the train accident in Wenzhou, public anger stated to boil up on Chinese microblogs with passengers posting pictures of blacked-out and lopsided trains stranded in the heat without air conditioning. By July 12, 286,000 Sina Weibo posts were concerned with the “Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail malfunction” (Bandurski 2011b). The week after the accident was characterized by a constant interaction between netizens, authorities, and the traditional media, who reported exceptionally critical about the accident.

Aside from a possible quarrel in the background between an over-confident MOR that had successfully forestalled a planned restructure into a super ministry of transport and now had failed to deliver the showcase for China’s leadership, “symbolizing the country’s technological prowess and the Party’s forward-thinking attitude”, on the one side and Premier Wen Jiabao on the other,17 the major battle happened between public opinion and the MOR’s respectively the government’s public relations executives.

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17 Right after the crash, critique on the MOR’s concentration of power emerged. It was blamed to be an “independent kingdom for years” (Wang 2011c) and rumors aroused that Prime Minister Wen made a second push for its reform. The first (failed) try to break up the monopolistic power of the MOR was taken in 2008 by setting-up the so-called Super Ministry of Transportation. Now, reports said, Wen proposed to the Politburo Standing Committee a major revamp of the MOR, but failed again (Lam 2011b). Among others Zhou Yongkang, in charge of public security, might have opposed him (Zhang 2011a).
The unprecedented wave of outrage on China’s Twitter-like microblogs in the wake of the bullet train crash took the central leadership completely off-guard. In the following week, there were 10 million messages related to the accident on Sina Weibo, and a total of 26 million posts across Chinese microblogging platforms. Lengthy lists bearing the names of the injured were circulated online, families looking for missing relatives uploaded pictures and brief descriptions of their family members. As hospitals admitted their first injured passengers, bloggers began posting messages calling for blood donations. Most of the comments were highly emotional early on, and rumors abounded. "Microblogs have once again beaten traditional media in terms of mobilization, amount of information and speed," reads a message posted on a microblog belonging to Sina Zhejiang Videonews (XH 2011c).

Journalists of official media as outraged as netizens also used their mobile phone, posted photos and wrote on their personal microblogs (Li 2011). Encouraged by millionfold “citizen journalism” they successfully resisted directives to limit reporting for several days. Notifications by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) that all media must speedily report whatever information was released by the Railway Ministry already leaked the second day after the crash. CPD tried to preclude eye witness reports and “re-thinking”-type reports (i.e., analytical reports), to stop re-tweeting on the journalist’s personal Weibo accounts and asked to disconnect the crash from the HSR-program and to convert the tenor of reports into touching stories: “in the face of great tragedy, there is great love”. Related articles should be kept on the back pages (Bandurski 2011d; CDT 2011; Custer 2011a; 2011b).

On July 29, just a day after Premier Wen’s visit at the crash scene pledging transparency and openness another directive decreed: “After the serious traffic accident on 23 July, overseas and domestic public opinions have become increasingly complicated. All local media, including newspaper, magazines and websites, must rapidly cool down the reports of the accident. [...] You are not allowed to publish any reports or commentaries, except positive news or information released by the authorities” (Chen 2011). Papers were forced to remove the issue from front page and to scrap many pages, internet portals cut links to news reports or videos. But again, various Chinese editorials neglected ban and published critical editorials, while angry journalists posted scrapped pages on Weibo (LaFraniere 2011). The editor of Southern Metropolis Daily posted on Sina Weibo (later deleted): “Tonight, hundreds of papers are replacing their pages; thousands of reporters are having their stories retracted; tens of thousands of ghosts cannot rest in peace; hundreds of millions of truths are being covered up. This country is being humiliated by numerous evil hands” (LaFraniere 2011).

While these CPD-directives are clear and unambiguous evidence of censorship and media control, there seem to be forces within the central leadership that do not completely agree with this form of “correct guidance of public opinion” (正确舆论导向). Articles in the CCP’s flagship paper People’s Daily commenting on the crash requested China to said “no” to a “blood-smeared GDP” (XH 2011b) and called for officials to communicate with the public through microblogs in an attempt to better understand the people it rules: “The language environment of the grassroots, with its special characteristics, is different from that of the party and government officials... Only by abandoning bureaucratic or empty talk can one’s microblog messages resonate with the public” (Bristow 2011). Already at the beginning of the year, when repression against critics of the regime had reached its peak, RMRB had published a series of editorials that requested more tolerance of dissenting views and attentive listening to voices from various circles of society as a means to preserve stability (RMRB 2011b; 2011a).

The idea behind these editorials is that an innovative China needs plurality as a source of prosperity. Already on the 17th party congress, Party Secretary Hu had talked about the “four
rights” (四个权利) — the right to know (知情权), the right to participate (参与权), the right to express (表达权) and the right to monitor (监督权). And in 2008 he had explained to People’s Daily his views on a better combination of media control and the active and more rapid use of media, including the internet, to “channel” public opinion (正确引导社会舆论). Now, on August 2, right after the quite fast ebbing of the Wenzhou 723-e-motion, the General Office of the CCP CC released a “notice” on the need to deepen openness of government affairs (CCP 2011b; XH 2011a). This document has apparently been in the works for a number of years and clearly relates to the National Ordinance on Open Government Information as of May 2008. The timing of its release, however, seems to suggest that those in support of more openness saw the MOR’s rather catastrophic handling of public relations as a painful reminder of how important it is to stay on top of sudden-breaking incidents and satisfy the public demand for information (Bandurski 2011a). The notice states under item 7: “[We] must have a firm grasp of openness on major sudden-breaking incidents [major accidents, catastrophes or mass incidents – GS] and hot issues of concern to the masses, objectively releasing the state and process of events, government actions, response measures to be taken by the public and the findings of official investigations [into incidents], responding in a timely manner to concerns in society, and correctly channeling public opinion” (XH 2011d).

Thus, while social media are pressuring the party-state to respond more quickly to sudden-breaking incidents, it is not ready to dumb its priority of setting the agenda itself. Since the Sun Zhigang-episode and the outbreak of SARS in 2003, there is a clear trend for more openness over these incidents, but the ambiguous term of “channeling” gives also ample room for control. Every single incident brings the issue back on stage and provides grounds for advocates and opponents to tackle about the level of openness and transparency balanced against control and stability. There seems, however, to exist a consensus on the more proactive use of media and particularly on the use of microblogs as an increasingly important tool for the government and other institutions in China.

In March 2011, the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center listed the use of microblogs to interact with the public as number five on a list of seven suggestions for dealing with sudden-breaking incidents. The center wrote: “Microblogs have shown most vividly the speed and breadth of information transmission on the internet, and they rapidly transmit information on the internet with a means of high efficiency. In sudden-breaking incidents, microblogs are already gradually becoming the core of public opinion propagation” (Bandurski 2011b; RMRB 2011d). At that time, the opening of “official microblogs” had already become a growing trend in China (Bandurski 2011b; RMRB 2011c). Over the past year, that number has grown with amazing speed — and three quarter of the top 100 microblogging government departments in China are public security bureaus, leading the Global Times to proclaim that “The Cops are Going Virtual”: More than 20,000 Public Security Bureaus (PSB) and police officers have launched official Sina Weibo accounts; government departments, agencies and individual officials nationwide have opened more than 40,000 accounts; more than 60% of government accounts have been launched by PSBs, 15 of the top 20 official accounts belong to local PSBs (Liang 2011a). The Shanghai municipal government’s four official microblogs accumulate close to two million followers (Li 2012b), indicating that these official accounts are effective in communicating with the public.

On May 24, 2012, People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center released a list of China’s top influential microblogs operated by public security offices at the provincial and sub-provincial level (Bandurski 2012a).
Nevertheless, the handling of microblogs and social media remains highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the incrimination of spreading “rumors” and “harmful information” supports measures to “strengthen guidance and management over social networks and instant messaging tools” – as the sixth Plenum of the 17th CCP CC decided (CCP 2011a) – and gave reason to establish a real-name system. On the other hand, party and government organizations at various levels, people’s congresses and political consultative conferences, judicial organs and other state organs as well as people’s groups and public officers, use microblogs to better understand the social mood and public opinion (Wang 2011a).

Wukan and the Reform of Local Governance\footnote{I would like to thank Sarah-Isabella Behrens for her contribution to this chapter.}

The conflict in Wukan, a village in Guangdong province under the administration of the Lufeng city government, had been simmering for many years until it finally blew out in September 2011. Annoyed with the corrupt land deals of village chief Chen Shunyi and Party Secretary Xue Chang who had adhered to their posts for more than 40 years villagers first organized a collective petition to the Lufeng city government and then broke into the village committee’s offices to find documents about the sales of their collective land (LifeWeek 2011; Wang 2012). The local authorities’ response alternated between the dispatch of riot police and the offer to negotiate, but since in the end they failed to address the villager’s grievances, on November 21 around 4,000 of them marched to Lufeng city and surrounded the government offices. They dispersed only after Qiu Jinxiong, the executive mayor, acknowledge their request and promised to give them a reply within 15 days (Jin 2011; Wen 2011; Lau 2012).

When rumors spread that Xue Jinbo - one of 13 representatives the villagers had appointed to deal with the government - had died under the custody of the police where he and four others had been taken for charges of attacking the police in September the conflict erupted anew and finally culminated in the village committee’s flight and the unprecedented blockade of the village (Hayashi 2012). Only after ten days of deadlock closely observed by a large contingent of international media the provincial leaders stepped in by constituting three special work teams to explore the issues of collective land, village finances, and breaches of law and Party discipline and dispatching the Province’s deputy Party Secretary Zhu Mingguo who set the tone for the further handling of the incident (Chen 2012; Lau 2012). Zhu approved the village’s demands and blamed the grassroots Party leadership and government for making errors. He promised free elections and investigations into the questionable real estate deals as well as the death of Xue (Bandurski 2011c). The process of village elections took off in January 2012 when thousands of villagers casted independent ballots to vote for a committee to supervise future election in the first step and ended on March 1 with the election of a new 11-member village committee (Xinhua 2012a). In April 2012 Xinhua announced that Xue and Chen were expelled from the party and six other former village officials were also punished (XH 2012).

In the course of the confrontation in Wukan and its disbandment, the international media’s attention particularly focused on the role of Guangdong’s Party Secretary Wang Yang and his ambition to become a member of the Politburo’s Standing Committee (PBSC) at the next party congress as well as on the village election as a possible model for the democratization of China. In our context, there are at least four aspects that make this conflict remarkable. The CPC’s leadership tried to use it to improve and promote its social management concept and to repress vested interests in land issues, but seemingly could not find an unambiguous approach to the related web debate. While Chinese official media hailed peaceful
negotiations as Chinese-style democracy, the provincial leadership rather tried to downplay the importance of the Wukan elections.

When on November 21 the mayor of Lufeng succeeded in dispersing the protesters, the Global Times highlighted “this type of social management approach” (Jin 2011). In an editorial, the paper criticized mistakes of local authorities in handling mass incidents (GT 2011e): “This thus leads to a vicious circle – the more endeavours local authorities make to ‘maintain stability,’ the sharper the conflicts get... It is in such circumstances that the latest case of orderly protest in Lufeng indicates a new way to unravel this Gordian knot... Lufeng provides an inspiring, new mentality for social stability across the nation”.

The paper, however, rejoiced too soon as we know. Local officials not only caused the violent eruption of the conflict by arresting the villagers’ representatives, they also denounced them of “illegal and criminal activities” (Chen 2012). In a video appearing online, Shanwei Party Secretary Zheng Yanxiong harshly accused villagers for using foreign media to invite the attention of the outside world to this local situation. They had not sought the government but instead “rotten” foreign media, and “these media will only be happy when our socialist nation is broken and divided” (Bandurski 2011c).

Perhaps it was no coincidence that on December 2, PBSC-member Zhou Yongkang reiterated at a seminar attended by leaders from nine Northern provinces that more efforts should be made to promote social management. “He said the current social management mechanism is not keeping pace with social and economic development... The job of improving social management should go deep in community-level organs” (Xinhua 2011). After the intervention of the provincial leadership, Zhou “urged law-and-order cadres to ensure ‘a harmonious and stable social setting’ ahead of the CCP’s 18th Congress... ‘(We must) deepen our efforts to mediate conflicts and disputes, improve the system of mediation to resolve conflicts and disputes at the grass-roots level and nip them in the bud’” (AFP 2011).

After the provincial leadership had poured oil on the troubled water, the question remained how the party could prevent incidents like that. The party’s Renmin Ribao took the lead in – remarkably sharply - blaming local officials to let the situation spiral out of control. The editorial asked for a more important position of social management and called on governments at all levels to ‘eliminate the ‘oppositional stance’ in dealing with the masses... Looking back on many mass incidents over the past few years and assessing their basic character, the vast majority arise from the fact that the masses, in response to appeals on behalf of their vested interests, have received no satisfaction or relief. This tells us that local governments must have a keen awareness of prevailing conditions in facing the interest demands of the masses, even if these involve tension and conflict” (WSJ 2011; Zhang 2011b).

In line with this and other rather conform comments on the failures of a suppressive stance and the “power of reason” (CD 2011a) Wang Yang declared at the provincial party congress in January 2012 that Guangdong would use the “Wukan approach” as a template to reform the governance at the grass-roots level. The handling of the Wukan incident should be used as a lesson to be studied across the province. “Guangdong deputy Party Secretary Zhu Mingguo ... set a reference standard to reform village governance across Guangdong... People’s democratic awareness is increasing significantly in this changing society... When their appeals for rights aren’t getting enough attention, that’s when mass incident happen” (Lau 2012). In March, Wang told reporters “that provincial officials might convene a meeting in the latter half of this year and instruct the province to strengthen the building of village organizations with the experience and lessons drawn from the Wukan incident” (Yang 2012).
The handling of the online debate and postings in microblogs seemingly followed the back and forth in the off-line world. While during the first two months critical posts had been quickly removed und searches for “Guangdong Wukan”, “Xue Jinbo” and then the substitutes “W-kan”, “Wu-k” or “WK” had been blocked – and all newspapers, television, and other mass media kept quiet –, some terms were unblocked after December 19 (CDT 2010). Since from then on the government didn’t make much of an effort to control the news one commentator even claimed that microblogs were not only tolerated, but blessed by the government to stabilize the regime (Johnson 2011).

Village elections – a focus of foreign media – were played down by Wang denying that it was a political novelty and saying it was simply carried out according to existing law. “In the past, the (election) might sometimes be a mere formality. We just corrected that problem this time” (Xuyang and Xu 2012). The same note was played by state media. “Democratic village elections have been around in China for more than 10 years”, wrote Global Times, and lamented: “It seems that the Western media are using Wukan’s election to criticize China’s democracy” (Shan 2012). Nevertheless, as Beijing News commented, the election “stands as a reminder to some government officials… the most important thing for the government is to maintain ‘supremacy of the law’” (BN 2012).

Premier Wen Jiabao tied in with the Wukan conflict and called in an article for the party’s theoretical magazine Qiushi (Seeking Truth) for better protection of farmers’ rights and improved compensation for those having their land seized. “No one is empowered to take away such rights” (Wen 2012). He reiterated his calls during his visit to Guangdong in early February emphasizing the importance of “maintaining direct elections at the village-level” (Lu 2012; Xinhua 2012b) as well as at the opening of the 11th National People’s Congress in early March. At the NPC the drafting of a new amendment to China’s Land Management Law was announced (Xuyang and Xu 2012; Yang 2012).

That the “Wukan approach” was meant to have further-reaching implications for China’s reform policy became obvious when at the provincial party committee meeting Wang Yang turned against “vested interests” as the main obstacle to reforms: “Thirty years ago, reform primarily meant breaking the bonds of ideology, but now reform means breaking the restraints imposed by vested interests” (Fewsmith 2012). Since then, the issue of vested interests has been broached by several party papers and critical social scientists arguing in favor of a revitalization of “reform energy” (Bandurski 2012b; Fewsmith 2012). Premier Wen stated after the ousting of Chongqing’s Party Secretary Bo Xilai that “reform has reached a troubled period akin to assaulting fortified positions” (Mattis 2012). A quite urgent warning that “powerful vested interests” were “holding reforms hostage” was expressed in the “Research Report Series on Social Progress” of the Social Development Task Group of the Sociology Department at Tsinghua University on January 9, 2011. The report, authored by sociology professor Sun Liping, argued that China was in the midst of a “transition trap” in which the impetus to push ahead with necessary reforms was being lost. As one of the five major symptoms of this trap the report identified an overcautious mentality and policies, which “lumps all matters together under the prerogative of stability preservation… with the result that the political, social and economic life of our nation has been thrown in a [chronic] state of ab-normalcy” (CYD 2012).

20 The paper itself had labeled the first negotiations in November Chinese-style democracy: “China is on the way of democracy, but does not explicitly refer to this road as democracy” (GT 2011b).

21 “Assaulting fortified positions” (gongjian) is the title of a research report published after the 17th party congress. The authors including senior researchers of the Central Party School in Beijing call for far-reaching democratic reform.
London Riots and the Need for Social Management

“If it had happened somewhere else, the chaos would have been given a name, such as ‘chrysanthemeum revolution’. Instead, it was described as overnight violence followed by looting”, nagged the Global Times by commenting on the riots in London in early August 2011 (GT 2011d). China Daily opened its pages to an Indian teacher in Beijing, to whom the debt crisis reaffirmed by the riots signaled the failure of Western capitalism and the European welfare state model as well as the end of the West as role model for good governance and justice (Singh 2011). The message distributed by the official media were twofold: First, when even in the democratic UK human rights were abused and when even Prime Minister Cameron who challenged China’s human rights issues during his visit suggested to block social networking websites, why should China refrain from doing so (GT 2011f; 2011a)? Second, the main lesson is to improve governance, i.e. social management.

Aside from media contributions two longer journal articles elaborate on the reasons of the London riots and the enlightening conclusions China could draw to handle sudden-breaking incidents, one of them published in a journal on youth research, the other one written by a research group of the Institute of Party Building within the Central Committee’s Organization Department (CCP 2011c; Su 2012). Both articles point at the complex socio-economic situation in the UK, social inequalities, the role of ethnic tensions, and the desolate situation of the British youth. China, as Su prominently highlight, should not neglect the young people and their opinions expressed in their own media, but also through official channels like petitions. In particular, it should pay attention to those young people who stay “outside the system” to effectively prevent for sudden-breaking incidents. Su also explains the merits and demerits of mobiles and other information and communication tools during the riots. Although they added fuel to the flames he militates against confusing cause and effect. The underlying reason was social problems, not social networks (Su 2012).

The party’s research group refers to the retreat of the state and the idea of a “big society” as another reason of the turmoil. Actually the social institutions made responsible to handle social problems were too powerless, finances were dried out, and security forces weakened. A lesson for party building in China would be to improve the selection of leading cadres on the basis of the “scientific development concept” and to enable them to handle the “contradictions within the people” that arise under the new societal situation. Leading cadres must constantly explore the rules of social management, create new forms of methods of social management and promote the active role of party members in the process of social management (CCP 2011c). Thus, while the analysis of the riot’s causes is quite palpable, the conclusions drawn rather seem to be made up to support already existing policy guidelines without any additional value added.

Conclusion

On its way to modernity the ruling party in China has to answer the questions, which kind of security it will provide the Chinese people with to help them coping with the risks of social and economic transformation and what kind of social institutions it will develop to re-embed the unleashed individuals. The official concepts of social management and their boosted promotion indicate that the party-state is highly aware that it has to listen to public opinion more seriously and to further engage people into risk management, if it really wants to find social trouble spots and to ease social conflicts. Participation and all forms of “democracy with Chinese characteristics”, however, remain restricted. Still afflicted with mistrust of its own population and particularly of the more or less autonomous social organizations party and governments wish to “manage” society. The party-state wants to improve its capacities
to direct society, not to reduce them. Consequently its concepts of stability preservation and social management follow a top-down approach and are rather geared to conservative ideas of management and control then to modern methods of governance.

Nevertheless, the once agreed on concepts are by no means fixed and unmodifiable. On the contrary, they are constantly recalibrated in the view of newly experienced contentious events, within or outside China. This recalibration, however, takes place within the boundaries of the concept itself and is affected by the disputes within the leadership or between the different levels of administration, particularly between the central and the local levels. Thus, the actual value added by the learning process might be small.

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