The State and the Individual: An Overview Interpretation*

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It could be that no people have ever outdone the Chinese in ascribing moral virtues to the state or in deprecating the worth of the individual. First Confucianism and then the Chinese version of Leninism went all out in extolling the importance of rulers and society and in minimizing the rights of individuals. The gap between the moral worth and the recognized rights of state and citizen in China was and remains huge both because of the way the Chinese have consistently given paramountcy to the state and the ways in which they have subordinated the individual to the group. The extraordinary imbalance in the relations of the state and individuals provides both the structural and the cultural bases for the human rights practices which are now the most contentious issues between China and the west, especially the United States. What is outrageous to Americans can be for most Chinese normal expectations – although since Tiananmen a majority may feel that the state has gone too far.

In Confucian China the state stood alone, as does the state and its Siamese twin the Party in the People's Republic, as the sole nation-wide institution. At the other extreme, both Confucianism and Maoism denied the autonomy of the individual and made self-sacrifice for the state the highest ideal of citizenship. Yet today, as China goes through its crisis of ideological legitimacy, cracks are appearing both in the public's awe of state authority and in the general hostility toward individualism. But to appreciate the enormity of the challenge of any significant change it is necessary to recognize the massive weight of cultural inertia which favours the state and inhibits the growth of a vibrant civil society.

It is true that some societies have gone further than the Chinese in glorifying the state with pomp and circumstance. Other have turned worshipping the state more into a religion. What is distinctive and extreme in the case of China is that government and the world of officialdom have consistently monopolized power and authority on a national basis. There have been no other organized elites or institutions with recognized rights and adequate nation-wide authority to check, counter and discipline the state.

Indeed, in the case of China it makes little sense to speak of state–society relations because the Chinese have never had a national civil society.[1] Apart from their government the Chinese had no

*I have benefited from the helpful criticism of Thomas Gold, Merle Goldman, Brian Hook and David Shambaugh.

1. For a general analysis of state–society relations in China, see Thomas B. Gold, "Party-state versus society in China," in Joyce K. Kallgren (ed.), *Building a Nation-State: China after Forty Years* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1990), ch. 5.

established institutions with authoritative reach that could extend across the entire country. Thus state and society did not have a nation-wide relationship: it was always an imperial or a national government confronting local communities, fragmented interests, parochial private groupings, or semi-illegal secret societies.[2] Except possibly when Buddhism was first introduced after the Tang, China never had an organized religion that was institutionally capable of restraining state authorities such as existed in Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist societies. The non-development of feudalism and capitalism in China also meant that there were no alliances of merchants or traders, no coalitions of cities or estated noblemen to balance the state authorities. In modern times the diversification and differentiation generally associated with modernization was arrested in China, in part because of the practice of relying upon enclaves to contain the impact of the west. In some of the Treaty Ports there were elements which might in time have become the bases of political power, but they were never a serious challenge to the Chinese state.[3] The closest the Chinese have come to having a society-wide balancing force to the state has been the intellectuals, Confucian scholars in the past and in modern times the emergence of a westernized intelligentsia. But for reasons which will be explored, Chinese intellectuals have only been able to contribute to the eroding of state legitimacy; they have not been able to act as a sustained counter-force to the Chinese state.[4]

As for the vulnerabilities of the individual, the conventional wisdom, which in this case is not far off the mark, is that Chinese culture is group-orientated and essentially hostile to individualism. The individual has consistently been seen as merely a disciplined member of some larger group and the group's interests are always assumed to take precedence over those of the individual. At the core of Chinese ethics and morality there has always been the ideal of depressing self-interest and glorifying self-sacrifice for the collectivity. The cultural basis of self-identity was never given a quasi-sacred dimension, as in cultures in which it is believed that each person has a unique and precious soul and that therefore each individual deserves respect and has certain inalienable rights, based on the inherent worth of human life. Instead, in Chinese culture the individual's identity has been consistently derived from particularistic relationships with

2. For a good description of informal groups in traditional China, see Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973).

3. On the limitations to the political influence of the Treaty Port Chinese, see Rhoads Murphey, *The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization: What Went Wrong?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1970).

4. For an excellent evaluation of the role of Chinese intellectuals, see Merle Goldman with Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin (eds.), *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1987), especially "Introduction: uncertain change" by Goldman and Cheek.

others. It is always some relationship, such as position within the family or other particularistic consideration, which determines self-identity for the Chinese. Therefore they are expected to make sacrifices without hesitation for the group which provides them with their identities.[5]

It is, of course, true that the Confucian state was expected to treat the individual with benevolence and compassion, and that today the government is the "people's" government. The individual's relationship to the state, however, has all along been one of dependency and not one based on the rights of individuals. Over time there have been ups and downs in the relationship between the state and the individual. When state authority has been strong the sub-groups that gave identity to the individual have usually also been firmly in control. Traditionally when the state became weakened the primary groups of family, clan, guild and secret society became increasingly important institutions, so there was still little increase in individual autonomy. Yet what is significant today is that the decline in the legitimacy of the Beijing regime is being accompanied by a loosening of institutional sub-groups and a marked increase in people seeking individual freedom.

This is the trend to be analysed in this article. It is necessary to start, however, by clarifying the issue of individualism in the Chinese cultural tradition. This will lead to an examination of the cultural practices that have inhibited the advancement of the interests of individuals, such as the techniques of state control, and then, finally, to questions about the current situation and what can be expected in state–individual relations in the post-Tiananmen environment. There are increasing signs of hope for the growth of respect for the individual but the weight of tradition cannot be easily set aside.

The Ambivalent Character of Individualism in Chinese Culture

The conventional wisdom that the Chinese are group-orientated is, paradoxically, matched by the equally conventional view that the Chinese are individualists. Chinese and foreigners alike nod their heads in agreement with Sun Yat-sen's complaint that the Chinese people were "like a plate of sand." Although Dean Acheson did not get universal support for his plea to allow the "dust to settle" (made in his 1949 White Paper about the "fall" of China), there was less criticism of his belief that the collectivism of communism was incompatible with the Chinese tradition of individualism, and hence communism could not last long in China. Thus there would seem to be a basic contradiction about individualism in Chinese culture which

5. One of the best anthropological studies of Chinese identity-formation in the family context involving "wordly and other-wordly residences" is still Francis L. K. Hsu's *Under the Ancestors' Shadow* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

needs to be cleared up. Indeed, the answer to the contradiction can provide us with deeper insights into the distinctive Chinese pattern of state–individual relations.

The confusion about individualism has, in fact, been extensively debated among students in the study of Chinese philosophical thought and political rhetoric. Wm. Theodore de Bary has long argued that in Neo-Confucianism there was a powerful notion of individual perfectibility.[6] In analysing the concept of the self in Ming thought, de Bary has stressed the extent to which the Wang Yang-ming school in particular advanced ideas about the importance of individualism akin to what can be found in western thought. In addition to Wang Yang-ming's dictum that "Study must be for one's own sake," and not simply to please others, de Bary cites Wang Ken's "celebration of the self," and Li Chi's "the importance of being selfish."[7] Thomas Metzger also agrees that with Neo-Confucianism the Chinese mandarins did experience inner tensions about self-realization, for they had a "... moral-psychological sense of living along a perilous divide between moral success and moral failure."[8]

Yet what makes the Wang Yang-ming school stand out in the history of Confucianism is precisely the fact that it went against the grain of the more traditional Confucianism and its orthodox interpretations. Moreover, as Benjamin Schwartz has noted, while the goal of moral advancement in Confucianism might call for a striving for self-realization, there was no appreciation of liberty and individual rights.[9] Donald Munro has identified some Chinese philosophical ideas which are consistent with elements in the western concept of individualism, but he also sees limitations on true autonomy.[10]

Even after allowances are made for the important qualifications about self-realization and self-perfection, it still remains true that the dominant feature of Confucianism was a pervasive hostility to the notion of personal autonomy and individualism. The goal of self-improvement was moral perfection according to established standards, and hence it sought excellence in terms of conformity to cultural norms, not in terms of the uniqueness of each individual. There was a hierarchy of moral achievement in which only the elite could strive for self-development while the mass of the people were ruled by example. Above all, however, there was no notion of individual rights.

6. Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

7. *Ibid.* pp. 145–225.

8. Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) p. 197.

9. Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

10. Although Munro acknowledges some of de Bary's interpretations, he is in the main closer to the standard view, holding that in Chinese culture there is really no place for a "private self" because the self is defined by society and government. See Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1977), pp. 45–55.

The debate over what were the precise limits of individualism in traditional China will no doubt go on indefinitely. There will be those, such as Tu Wei-ming, who will argue that Confucianism found a happier balance between self and community than the western liberal balance between majority interests and human rights for the individual. Philosophical discourse aside, in practical political terms John Fairbank's observations on the limits of individualism in Chinese culture fairly accurately summed up the traditional situation when he noted that, "To say that liberalism rests on individualism under the supremacy of law is more sensible and gratifying than to say, as one does in Chinese, that the doctrine of spontaneous licence (*ziyou zhuyi*) rests on the doctrine of self-centredness (*geren zhuyi*) under the supremacy of administrative regulations (*falu*)."[11]

The Chinese instinct has indeed been to see individualism as nothing more than self-centredness. Lee Kuan Yew, in upholding authoritarian practices in Singapore, has emphasized the evils he ascribes to western individualism and the superiority of a virtuous form of communitarianism which in his view can be found in Confucianism. The campaigns against "bourgeois liberalism" of late 1986 to mid-1987 and again after the Tiananmen Massacre revealed the continuing hostility of the Chinese elite toward western individualism. In March 1987 Zhao Fusan, then vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, wrote an extended essay attacking individualism by extensively quoting American scholars who had criticized contemporary western culture for being too ego-centred and lacking in a sense of moral responsibility. Citing western views from Tocqueville to Daniel Bell and concentrating particularly on Robert Bellah *et al.*'s *Habits of the Heart*, Zhao argued that the "culture of individualism is morally vacuous and socially irresponsible" and "the ideologies of western capitalism are in a morbid state and had developed into a cancerous state." By contrast, in China's cultural tradition, "individuals have always been closely linked with society... [and] individuals have never been placed above society, and the values of individuals have always been unified with the responsibilities of society."[12]

Zhao, like Lee Kuan Yew, but not like Reinhold Niebuhr, sees the alternatives as Moral Society and Immoral Man. The issue however is falsely formed when it is posed as a stark choice between the individual and the community. The more basic question that should be asked concerns the sources of the communitarian values: are they an expression of the majority interests of society or are they the values of an authoritarian elite? Genuine communitarian values evolve out

11. *The China Quarterly*, 96 (1983), p. 739.

12. Zhao Fusan, "Some thoughts on certain aspects of modern western culture: reading notes," *People's Daily*, as quoted by Richard Madsen, "The spiritual crisis of China's intellectuals," in Deborah Davis and Ezra F. Vogel (eds.), *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen: The Impact of Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 247.

of the process of individuals interacting with each other and working to harmonize their separate interests. If the communitarian interests represent only the values of the state elite, no matter how intrinsically worthy they may be, the result is still an authoritarian state.

Learning to be Selfless

The contradictions about individualism in the formal philosophy of Confucianism also turn out to be a source of psychological tensions when we examine the experiences that the Chinese generally go through in arriving at their individual identities. Both in the past and today the dominant cultural practices in bringing up children have tended to instil conflicting and contradictory ideals about individualism. Children are taught to be selfless and to defer to collective norms, but they are also expected to gain recognition through achievement.[13]

The contradiction is intensified by what is explicitly taught and what is implicit in their experiences. Chinese children are generally told that their identity is totally derived from belonging to some larger group or community, and it is therefore from this "Other" that the individual receives his or her "greater self" or *da-wo*. What is generally left vague is where the boundary should be between the *da-wo* and the *xiao-wo* or the "lesser self." Worse still, there are few clearly-defined standards for identifying the conditions when it may be permissible to assert the interests of the lesser or private self. Self-sacrifice is glorified to such an extent that the safest rule for the individual is to pretend always to selflessness. The tension, however, is made more acute because the tendency is for parents to be very indulgent in the early years, so that the child learns the pleasures of wilfulness, but the adult world then imposes demanding controls which teach the child that reality requires yielding to the wishes of others.[14]

13. For a discussion of the conflicting tendencies in Chinese socialization practices, placed in historical context, see Jon L. Saari, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), especially ch. 4.

14. For a more detailed analysis of the psychological dimensions of the Self–Other problem in Chinese culture see "The psychological roots of China's opposing political cultures," in my *The Mandarin and the Cadre* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988). That analysis in turn was based on evidence found in such works as Michael Harris Bond (ed.), *The Psychology of the Chinese People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); David Y. H. Yu (ed.), *Chinese Culture and Mental Health* (Orlando, Fl.: Academic Press, 1985); Kenneth A. Abbott, "Cultural change and the persistence of the Chinese personality," in George de Vos (ed.), *Response to Change: Society, Culture and Personality* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1976); Donald J. Munro (ed.), *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1985). Especially noteworthy are the various works of Francis L. K. Hsu, including "The Self in cross-cultural perspective," in Anthony J. Marsella, George De Vos and Francis L. K. Hsu (eds.), *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (New York & London: Tavistock Publishers, 1985); "Eros, affect, and Pao," in Francis L. K. Hsu (ed.), *Kinship and Culture* (Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1971); and *Americans and Chinese: Passages to Difference* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

The Chinese socialization process thus seems to produce an unresolvable tension between dependence upon an Other for identity while generating a craving for wilful assertiveness. Individuals are expected to be not only meek and conforming but appreciative of the group that provides their identities. Yet there is also the unforgotten pleasure of having once been the happy object of indulgence, which leaves, if not a hankering to be heroic, at least an instinctive appreciation for the posturing of others, and hence a love for the dramatic. Liu Binyan has described quite explicitly this tension in his own life and how it contributed to the appeal of communism for him:

> As for myself, I joined the revolution mainly to liberate myself, to realize myself. I could not say precisely what this "self" was, but I had a feeling that there was something in me that, though still undeveloped, would eventually blossom, until one day I would do something very special. . . . We were taught that the true way to start on the revolutionary path was through self-abnegation. The first political term we learned was *bourgeois ideology*, which we were told was synonymous with *individualism* – although nobody could ever explain to me where natural self-interest ends and selfishness begins.[15]

The rest of Liu Binyan's autobiography is a documentation of his slow discovery that the Party's attack on what he called the "original sin" of individualism was directed at keeping the masses in line so that the leadership would be free to advance its interests, which could be quite personal and not necessarily in the national interest.

This peculiar combination of idealizing self-sacrifice but also seeking recognition through achievement, and linking these apparent opposites to the essence of heroism, was repeatedly exploited in the stories of the model heroes of the Mao era. Lei Feng embodied that combination, but what is culturally significant is that the Chinese people generally accepted as plausible that this "model" soldier would have left behind not just a diary, which was the sole source of evidence of his good deeds, but also glossy print photographs of himself in action, new ones to accompany the fresh stories in each new campaign. For a people to be able to suspend disbelief to such a degree suggests that they must have been presented with material which conformed to their social expectations.

The tension at the basis of self identity is made more complex in Chinese culture by a further source of fundamental ambivalence: the individual is expected to be selfless in sacrificing for the collectivity, but in return the collectivity provides only limited rewards. The group rarely stresses emotional support, only material well-being. There is little sense of team spirit or warm intimacy in any of the collectivities which define the individual's identity. Individuals are, of course, given a degree of security through association with the group which establishes their sense of identity. Their rewards are, however, primarily of a symbolic or ritualistic nature, while their reciprocating

15. Liu Binyan, *A Higher Kind of Loyalty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990) p. 16. Italics in original.

demonstrations of proper selflessness are expected to be quite materialistic. Consequently the individual learns early to be content with getting relatively little out of what is often a very unfair exchange. Chinese children also learn through the disciplining effects of socialization the necessity of controlling their emotions. To act properly is not to follow one's feelings but to conform to standards, and one should not expect emotional returns just for doing what is right. When emotions do surface, they tend to be destructive and not constructive, for there are few acceptable ways of displaying one's feelings.

The traditional inhibitions about expressing warm emotions toward the members of the very group that provides one's identity, and the taboos about admitting to having private interests, created in Chinese culture an unresolvable problem of craving for intimacy, of idealizing warm relationships in the abstract but in practice finding them unobtainable.[16] The arranged marriages of the past and today's numerous obstacles to easy and open ways of courting have made self-discovery through intimacy a difficult and often frustrating matter. Moreover, individuals have generally not been encouraged to seek out kindred spirits and to build webs of strong emotional ties with people with like private interests. The rules of *guanxi* hold that these relationships should have as their basis shared particularisms that are objectively defined, such as a common place of origin, the same school or class, the same unit, but not shared private interests. Even the lubricating spirit of *ganqing* generally lacks the emotionally intense feelings of personal indebtedness and obligation of, say, the Japanese bonds of reciprocity which are built upon their powerful sentiments of *on* and *giri*. The tacit understanding in Chinese culture is that people may be driven to using *guanxi* for materialistic reasons but not generally to fulfil an emotional need for belonging. The popular appeal of the Robin Hood band in the *Water Margin* novel and the poems about the fellowship of drinking companions stemmed in part from the fact that they responded to the tension between the idealization of intimacy and the recognition that it was a forbidden goal, involving what was probably improper if not illegal behaviour.

In short, the problem of individualism in Chinese culture is one in which form and ritual call for conformity, humility and selflessness, but the urge for assertiveness and for being seen as special is not entirely dampened. Conformity may be widespread, but the emotions of a team spirit are rarely experienced. The Chinese craving for the unobtainable ideal of intimacy makes people believe that true comradeship should be possible, but experience teaches that it is unrealistic, indeed dangerous, to let go of their emotions and openly trust others. Thus while behaviour must deny the legitimacy of individualism, under the cultural constraints there are strong urges

16. Many Chinese have informed me that the discussion of the problem of intimacy in *The Mandarin and the Cadre* (ch. 2) spoke to something very real in their lives, and that they wished it was a topic that could be more frankly discussed by Chinese.

toward individual autonomy. This suggests that should structural circumstances change there could be a strong potential for greater self-orientated rather than group-orientated behaviour. We can see this potential, and its limitations, in the Chinese tradition of belonging to associations but not making heavy demands on the group's policies.

Passive Participation and the Absence of Voluntary Associations

From early times a remarkably high proportion of the Chinese elite belonged to private societies or associations in which they could find personal security and well-being just from belonging while having little say in the group's policies. In a literal sense the Chinese had a higher level of "participation" than was found in most traditional societies, but it was essentially a passive form of participation in which individual self interest was not openly asserted.[17] In the Qing dynasty, as James Townsend has observed, "... virtually every Chinese was thoroughly experienced in the benefits, problems, and adjustments of cooperative and associational life as a result of membership in small-scale social units.... The Chinese citizen found his social identity, his security, and his hopes for advancement in his local associations and not in the wider political community."[18] Indeed, beyond the family and clan there were in traditional China a great variety of associations ranging from lineage societies, benevolent associations, occupational guilds and provincial associations to the secret societies which helped to provide identity and security for their members. In most cities there were *huiguan* or "Landsmann halls" where people originating from the same province or region could meet and gain a sense of collective security. As Ping-ti Ho has noted, "While all these organizations transcended biological ties, they nevertheless offered their members a face-to-face intimacy that usually characterizes primary social associations."[19]

Beyond providing their members with a sense of belonging, the traditional association and societies also performed a variety of public functions. The leadership could be quite public-spirited, and as a local elite they would make voluntary contributions in answer to community concerns, such as helping to maintain water control, public works, schools, and other charitable and benevolent activities. Mary Backus Rankin, after detailed studies of such associations, has concluded that it is helpful to think of state–society relations in the

17. The added theoretical dimension to the essentially structural-functional approach which made Franz Schumann's *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) such a classic study was the historical recognition of continuity and change with respect to organizational membership in Chinese society.

18. James R. Townsend, *Political Participation in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) p. 19.

19. Ping-ti Ho, "Salient aspects of China's heritage," in Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou (eds.), *China's Heritage and the Communist Political System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), Vol. I, p. 32.

late imperial period in terms of three spheres: the state sphere (*guan*), the private sphere (*si*), and a distinctive public sphere (*gong*) which included the public-spirited dimensions of the various associations and societies.[20] In a sense the associations were performing functions which properly belonged to the Chinese state but which the state was unable to carry out because of its limited effectiveness. What is significant for state–individual relations is that the associations and societies did not advance the private interests of citizens, for that would be seen as selfishness. The only ideology available was that of benevolent rule, and hence the "public" sphere was not a challenge to the state but rather an ally in support of a system of group memberships in which participation was essentially passive.

There are several features of this tradition of passive participation that are relevant for understanding state–individual relations in contemporary China. First, the group identities established by the societies and associations (*she* and *hui*) tended to be intense and generally undiluted because individuals usually belonged only to one, and thus they did not experience the cross-pressures common to organizational membership in modern societies. At the most, people might belong to their lineage association and one other, but since the same people would generally belong to both, the likelihood of cross-pressures was minimized. Therefore people were generally exposed only to the views of like-minded individuals and hence the pressures for conformity were constantly reinforced. Martin C. Yang describes how the introduction of Protestants and Catholic churches into a Shandong village simply reinforced the existing group divisions and thereby intensified conflicts in a community in which people were already divided into their separate associations.[21]

Secondly, there tended to be little connection between personal motivation for participation and the ostensible objectives of the group or association. Individuals might have their private needs for belonging which were in no way related to the policy goals of the leadership. Consequently the membership did not feel itself critically involved in either making or evaluating policy decisions. This tradition meant that there was considerable tolerance for whatever the leadership wanted to do. The lack of rigour in distinguishing policy, ideology and private motives and purposes contributed to a blending of what some might feel should be separated but which the Chinese captured with their once-popular phrase of *sanjiao heyi* (the three teachings [Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism] united into one).[22]

Thirdly, individuals were not only expected to be passive in

20. Mary Backus Rankin, "The origins of a Chinese public sphere: Local elites and community affairs in the late imperial period," paper presented to New England China Seminar, Harvard University, 27 November 1990. See also her *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

21. Martin C. Yang, *A Chinese Village* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), chs. 12–13.

22. Richard J. Smith, *China's Cultural Heritage: The Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644–1912* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), p. 100.

following the guidance of the group but they were also essentially passive in coming to their associations, in that membership tended to be essentially ascriptive. Birth determined one's geographical association and membership in secret societies tended to be a family matter. Thus, even though there might be initiation rites, one generally had little choice about whatever association one was expected to join. This was a critical feature in the organization of Chinese society since it meant that there was no tradition of people forming voluntary associations spontaneously in response to their private interests. One of the striking features of Chinese social and economic history is that from dynasty to dynasty the societies and associations remained the same and there were astonishingly few innovations.

Thus, although people had a recognized basic need to belong to groupings, the culture did not encourage the creating of new groupings in response to new interests. Before the rise of the Chinese Communist Party little attention was given to designing and executing strategies to attract members to groups, so in spite of the group-orientated character of Chinese society people showed little inclination or skill in seeking out others with like interests to form new associations. It was this difficulty in getting people to join voluntary associations that made Sun Yat-sen characterize the Chinese people as a "plate of sand." Fears and suspicion that one might be taken advantage of were easily heightened by the common notion that there was something improper about forming new voluntary associations. Evidence of the essential illegitimacy of such groups can be seen from the fact that historically the most successful ones were usually gangs formed by criminals.

In modern times the tradition of having to participate socially and politically according to one's assigned group identity, and of being unable to form more personally meaningful associations, has no doubt contributed to rising levels of discontent and frustration. The group identity tradition made people feel that it was natural and acceptable for the Party to assign them to their respective units or *danwei*, and thereafter to mobilize them to participate in mass campaigns. Yet such group identities failed to answer the desire for more complete personal fulfilment which might have been satisfied by a greater variety of voluntary associations. Even when things are going well the individual may gain little emotional satisfaction from his assigned group, and when things go badly demoralization tends to spread quickly. During the Mao years the state had the institutional arrangements to command mass participation, but with limited individual initiative; and when setbacks occurred, as with the Deng reforms, the mood in China could quickly become depressed.

Collective Responsibility and State Control of the Individual

The character of state–individual relations takes on additional dimensions when the focus of attention is shifted from the indivi-

dual's identity to the state's attitude towards the individual. Historically the fact that the individual was inexorably bound to a collectivity – the family, clan or village – simplified the state's tasks of maintaining order. Operating according to the tradition of collective responsibility, officials did not have to deal with separate individuals but only with the responsible figures of each collectivity. When a crime was committed it was not necessary to apprehend the actual culprit; it was only necessary to identify his family or clan and then approach the patriarch to deliver up the person, or whoever else might serve the purposes of punishment. Since fathers had no desire to suffer for the misdeeds of their sons, they tended to be stern in inculcating both filial piety and correct behaviour. Filial piety was not just a matter of ancestor worship and respect for one's parents, it was honoured as a guarantee that offspring would not bring down upon their parents the anger of the state. Similarly the Confucian state, in extracting resources from society in the form of taxes and corvée labour, delegated responsibilities for reaching the individual by dealing with community leaders who in turn would call upon the family or clan heads to provide what was required.

A key institution for maintaining order in imperial China was the *baojia* system which was based on a pyramid ordering of households. In each district the magistrate was expected to organize all the households into, first, units called *pai*, consisting of 10 or so households, then the *jia* of 100 households, and finally the *bao* of 1,000 households. The system provided a police network without the need for policemen. Heads of households kept their own members in line and neighbours looked in on each other. T'ung-tsu Ch'u notes that, "Consequently, the principal task of the heads of *pao-chia* was to watch the local residents and report any unlawful activities in the various families (gambling, religious heterodoxy, selling unlicensed salt, illegal coining of money, harbouring of fugitives or other criminals), and to keep an eye on suspicious strangers."[23] The system has also had the positive function of providing care for the needy. The Kuomintang revived the *baojia* system, and used it also for political and ideological control.[24] Interestingly, during the Sino-Japanese war the Japanese in many ways invigorated and administratively improved upon the *baojia* institutions in the areas under their control by instituting regular reporting procedures.

Although the *baojia* system both facilitated state control of individuals and reinforced their ties to a larger group, it also, on the positive side, gave them a limited shield against having to have direct dealings with the state, thus sparing them many of the troubles of citizenship. This degree of marginal security for the individual in

23. T'ung-tsu Ch'u, *Local Government in China Under the Ch'ing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 150–51.

24. Under the Kuomintang the system involved 10 households for each *jia*, and ten *jia* for each *bao*. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, p. 111.

relations with the state became dramatically significant under the new system which came with the establishment of the People's Republic.

The PRC Redefines the Status of the Individual

One of the sharpest breaks with China's political traditions brought about by communist rule was the radical change in the basis of the individual's group identity. It might have been easier and more efficient for the Party to have imposed its authority upon the Chinese people by simply relying upon the established institutions of collective responsibility. Indeed, during the civil war the communists did make use of the authority of village leaders and the heads of families and clans. Yet, with the establishment of the People's Republic, a direct assault was made on precisely those institutions. Indeed, the family system was one of the first institutions targeted for destruction, initially by a new marriage code and then by encouraging children to report on their parents' beliefs and actions.[25] In driving out the old the Party introduced new units of collective identity which were more administratively binding and less rewarding than those of the traditional society. In the urban areas it was the work unit, the *danwei*, and in the rural areas the production brigades.[26]

There were several reasons why the Party chose to abandon the conventional Chinese institutions for collective responsibility. The Party distrusted the *baojia* system because it had been used by the Kuomintang to capture undercover communists. In addition, however, there was the objective of not just controlling the population but changing people's thinking. The leadership was alert to the probability that under the old system of collective responsibility it would have

25. It would be hard to overstate the appeal of radicalism for young Chinese in the 1920s and 1930s which stemmed from their dissatisfaction with the traditional family system. Writers such as Ba Jin and Ding Ling were popularly described as radicals largely because they wrote stories about unhappy family life. Historically there probably has been no greater disfunction between private cause and public effect than that of the radicalized Chinese youth who wished to get rid of arranged marriages, concubinage, and the absolute authority of grandfathers and fathers, and who ended up with the totalitarian controls of a Confucian Leninist party – a party which professed that it was seeking to raise political consciousness and make more modern many of those radicalized writers by sending them to the countryside to live with traditional peasants who believed in the old family system. To add insult to injury such writers were required to idealize such peasants in their writings while attacking as evil "rightists" enlightened individuals with modern skills and knowledge, that is, people who were like what they themselves had aspired to be. Ding Ling seemed to believe until the day she died that 22 years of rustication at labour reform in the countryside, topped by three years of solitary confinement, was a price worth paying for getting rid of concubinage and the authority of Chinese fathers.

26. These organizational arrangements are well described in Martin King Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). The dependence of the individual on the *danwei* was in some respects more complete than the traditional dependence upon the family, for the *danwei* controlled one's career, housing, rationing, marriage decision, and even when to have a child. Moreover, through the institution of the personal dossier, the *danan*, the work unit knew things about individuals that were kept secret from them.

been much too easy for people to engage in feigned compliance and to practise the art of what James Scott has called "everyday forms of resistance."[27]

During the Mao era the state went beyond placing individuals in small group organizations (*xiaocu*) by forcing the population essentially into a caste system by giving everybody a class label according to the status of the head of the household at the time the PRC was established. From 1951 the Party used the traditional family for its household registration book (*huji bu*), in which a page for each member of the family recorded basic biographical data, including the "place of the family's ancestral origin, family origin, and class status."[28] In the 1960s class labelling became an increasingly important element in every individual's life. Those who were fortunate enough to be classed among the "five red types" (*hong wu lei*) could hope for upward mobility while those in the "five black categories" (*hei wu lei*) or worse were designated as "bad elements" (*huai fenzi*) and had no future at all. Intellectuals, of course, were denounced as being of the "striking ninth category."

The public reaction to the policy of placing people in work units, maintaining secret dossiers, and giving "class" labels reflected the fundamental Chinese cultural ambivalence about individualism. Initially the people were surprisingly docile, accepting as almost normal and useful the idea that everyone should belong to some group and have a classification which reflected moral goodness and badness. In time, however, as Lynn White has shown, the policy of labelling became the cause of deep and angry frustration which helped to fuel the violence of the Cultural Revolution,[29] and Richard Kraus has documented how Mao Zedong transformed the Marxian class categories into a host of additional "classes," and then made "class into caste."[30]

On balance what is most significant for understanding the relationship of the state and the individual is the passive spirit with which the Chinese public initially accepted the Party's use of group identities for controlling individuals.[31] People seem to have taken it as normal that there should be neighbourhood committees, with old "Aunties" keeping an eye on everyone's movements, and that the *danwei* should have such extensive command over so much of one's life. It is surprising, but significant, that the protests for democracy in the late 1980s involved almost no complaints about the *danan* files. The idea that the state should keep such secret dossiers, which would horrify

27. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
28. Lynn T. White II, *Policies of Chaos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 88.
29. *Ibid.* ch. 1.
30. Richard Curt Kraus, *Class Conflicts in Chinese Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) ch. 6.
31. The ways in which Chinese have responded to the *danwei* system have been well analysed in Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

people in western cultures, has not been the focus of complaints by even liberal Chinese. The critical writer Liu Binyan complained that he had been unjustly classified as a "rightist," but until Tiananmen he seemed to accept it as quite natural that people should be classified and that there should be a system of secret files on all urban people. Indeed, one of the most striking features of post-Cultural Revolution behaviour has been the passion with which so many Chinese tried to rectify their class classifications. In spite of the horrors of a system of labelling people, few who suffered from it were immediately ready to denounce the practice and many were interested only in correcting their personal classification.

Yet there remains a fundamental difference between the traditional basis of group responsibility and the communist system of classification and group belonging which has added to popular frustrations. In traditional China the "Other" which helped to define the self was a permanent institution which played a central role in childhood socialization and the adult life cycle. In contemporary China individuals are forced into the *danwei* long after their personalities are formed, and thus there is a greater urge to avoid what can be seen as a form of entrapment. Conformity with the group norms of the traditional family was a part of the individual's basic culture and personality; conformity with the norms of the *danwei* is an outside imposition of control. This suggests that the psychological intensity of the group's control may be less today, and that with any further weakening of the *danwei* system there may be significant signs of greater individualism.

Cracks in the Structure

Forty years of erratic PRC rule has seriously strained both the image of an omnipotent state and the cellular groupings basic to the individual's identity. The zig-zags of policy over the decades has raised widespread doubts as to whether the leadership has the answers to the country's problems. Ideology has been stretched to breaking-point and both leaders and followers talk of a "crisis of faith." The violent turmoil of, first, the Great Leap, then the Cultural Revolution, and then the unexpected openings of the Deng reforms, followed by the repressive closings after Tiananmen, have all combined to weaken the security of group-based identity and compelled people to worry more about themselves as individuals.[32] Change, however, has been checked by the inertia of the past, and thus the system of state–individual relations holds, but with increasingly large cracks.

The erosion of the moral authority of the Chinese state, and the failure to create a modern system of legitimacy based on a political

32. For an excellent discussion of the rediscovery of personal relationships in the post-Mao era, see Thomas B. Gold, "After comradeship: personal relations in China since the Cultural Revolution," *The China Quarterly*, 104 (1985) pp. 657–675.

order shaped by the competing interests in society, has left the regime inordinately dependent upon repression. But the legacy of the decade of reforms has also left the state incapable of terrorizing the people to the degree it once could. In the post-Tiananmen environment people are demonstrating once again their mastery of the Chinese art of dissembling. As the Chinese state has become weaker and its legitimacy has been brought into greater question there seems to be a dual process of ritual behaviour: the state's actions have become more formalistic and less substantive, while the people's response to the state's authority has become increasingly cynical, with general acceptance on the surface, but private reservations, combined with a touch of anger.

The change in the character of the post-Tiananmen Chinese state involves more than just a question of legitimacy; it involves a confusion about state purposes to a degree that the government seems paralysed midway between its Confucian and its Leninist traditions. The leadership still seeks legitimacy by claiming to be the upholder of a moral order, and it pretends that its ranks are filled with morally exemplary cadres whose superior attributes justify their domination over mere subjects. But the more the state asserts its claims to moral superiority, the more it is seen as corrupt, and so the disease of cynicism spreads. The state's power, however, is not trivial. The official Beijing *Evening News* reported that during the Asian Games 650,000 people were involved in security work and surveillance in the capital alone.[33] It also has more than just the powers of coercion; it has in its favour fear of chaos and the inertia of habit, which in the realm of government is easily translated into the potency of ritual and formality. And as Clifford Geertz has documented, a state devoted to ritual can be a stable and enduring institution.[34] The ritual state, of course, has an easier time if its subjects are believers, but it can still preserve its critical element of dignity if the people are willing to go along in order to get along.

Today the Chinese rulers have had to abandon many of the activist ambitions of their Leninist tradition. The Party can no longer mobilize the masses as it did during the campaigns of the Mao era.[35] Instead, officialdom in Beijing, as it awaits the succession to Deng's rule, goes through the motions of governing, not wanting to check too carefully on how thoroughly its orders are being carried out – particularly in the coastal provinces where not only citizens but also local

33. Nicholas Kristof, "From China's provinces, rare voice of dissent," *New York Times*, 12 November 1990, p. 5.

34. Clifford Geertz, *Negara* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

35. Tyrene White argues that the practice of the Maoist mobilization campaigns is not entirely dead in the post-revolutionary Deng era, as can be seen in her case study of the one-child policy. But she admits that "Mobilization of some sort may not necessarily remain a permanent feature of Chinese politics." Indeed so, for to call, for example, the 1990 blowing of bugles against pornography a mobilization campaign is to make a mockery of the concept. Tyrene White, "Postrevolutionary mobilization in China: The one-child policy reconsidered," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1990), pp. 53–76.

officials pretend that the era of economic liberalization is not over.[36] Half-hearted commands are reciprocated with half-hearted obedience. The words of government have lost much of their substantive meaning, as they have at best only symbolic significance – often as code words which stand for the opposite of their literal meanings.

Beijing officials have become increasingly aware of their impotence in controlling the provincial authorities. Chen Yun has been quoted as criticizing the "traffic light philosophy," which he says originated in Guangdong, where the localities treat the centre's policies in three ways: "When the red light is on, they make a detour and proceed as they were going; when the yellow light is on, they ignore it and keep going at the same speed; and when the green light is on, they rush ahead at full throttle."[37] The central authorities in Beijing have sought to strengthen the state by transferring provincial and local officials and rotating the governors of such key provinces as Liaoning, Henan and Hebei in the hope of preventing them from consolidating their independent power bases. As the *People's Daily* editorial of 4 August 1990 said of the shuffling, its aim is to "free cadres from being plagued with various complicated relations... [an] unfavourable position caused by their long tenure in one locality."[38] But this attempt to revive the Qing dynasty "rule of avoidance" in assigning officials only accentuates the extent to which the central authorities are ruling more in form than in fact.

The character of the Chinese state is thus reverting back to the traditional and highly ritualized Confucian state. The Ming state, which Ray Huang has so vividly described, was a hierarchy of officials who were much too wise to advance policy alternatives with vigour and earnestness, for they knew that policies rarely succeeded and therefore advocacy would only reveal impotence.[39] It is better to uphold stability by concentrating on the rituals of governance, arguing about orthodoxy, and scheming to ensure that any misguided attempts at a policy by another faction will be doomed. This is the direction in which the post-Tiananmen Chinese state seems to be heading as the Beijing leaders try to mask the degree of paralysis that their factional differences have created.[40] The PRC state has a long way to go before becoming a Ming state, but it has already gone a long way from its Leninist tradition.

36. Although Ezra Vogel's research was done before Tiananmen, his findings about Guangdong's economic progress are still largely valid. See Ezra Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

37. "Guangdong does it own way, the centre reproaches," *Chung-yang ribao* (*Central Daily News*), 23 October 1990, p. 4.

38. Cited in Ann Scott Tyson, "China rotates leaders to cut local power," *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 November 1990, p. 4.

39. Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

40. Although it has become conventional to picture the Chinese leadership as paralysed because of the divisions between "hardliners" and "reformers," the actual factional divisions are more complex and less vividly determined by policy alternatives. For a good identification of four factional groupings, see David Shambaugh, "China in 1990: The year of damage control," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1 (1991), pp. 36–49.

Signs of Increased Individual Autonomy

The drift toward a more ritualized state has been facilitated by the skills of the public (and of local officials) in practising feigned compliance. People have been quick to learn the limits of obligation in obeying the state's will and the areas where lip-service is enough to do the trick. Intellectuals and students know what can and cannot be said in different contexts.

The combination of the shocks and disillusionments of the Cultural Revolution and the fresh air that came with the decade of "opening" to the outside and the liberalizing reforms may have done more to inspire a spirit of individualism among modernizing Chinese than any development in Chinese history, with the possible exception of the May Fourth movement. A generation of former Red Guards has seemingly taken to heart Mao's message of distrusting authority, and they are now directing their suspicions toward the current rulers. The new ideas that came with the opening of China in the 1980s have transformed a still younger generation into non-believers in the jargon of revolution which was the faith of their fathers. Older people react passively as they face the fact that all the heroic efforts of 40 years produced little progress toward their goals of Utopia, for it is too late for them to seek new beliefs.

In this situation leaders of what were once the disciplining collectivities – the small group, the *danwei*, the rural brigade – are torn between accepting the feigned compliance posturing of their members and trying sternly to implement the spirit of the orders from above. It is normally easier to side with those one has to live with day-by-day, and the result is an ever-increasing institutionalization of a ritualized state. As individuals learn what the leaders of their *danwei* will let them get away with, the unit they are obliged to belong to turns into a shield against the possibility of the state's acts becoming substantive rather than just tolerable rituals. This has been particularly true since Tiananmen.

More than just opening the door to outside influences, the decade of reforms institutionalized changes of a modern nature which have strengthened the position of the individual in Chinese society. A potentially significant development associated with the decade of reforms which in time may give greater protection for the individual was a series of steps taken to establish a more comprehensive legal system. The discovery that foreign investors were unhappy with the protection provided by Chinese legal practices resulted in improvements in the civil code which made it possible for private parties to sue each other and the government for breach of contract. Then on 1 October 1990 there came into effect the new Administrative Litigation Law, which specifies how citizens can sue officials who have wrongfully treated them. Although not many citizens have been so foolish as to try to take to court any senior cadres, there have been a few publicized cases of citizens suing manifestly corrupt local officials.

The pride the government seemed to take in the new laws helped to give the idea that people should have rights that go beyond the traditional practice of simply publicly bewailing mistreatment. The efforts by the two lawyers defending the Tiananmen protester Wang Juntao to use the Criminal Procedure Law also suggests that enacted laws are not entirely meaningless. Although the government steamrollered over the attempt, it was still significant that the lawyers stood up in a Chinese courtroom and appealed to the text of that law. Just as hypocrisy is the compliment that vice plays to virtue so the Chinese state's acknowledgment of certain legal maxims does suggest that individuals have rights, at least in principle if not always in practice.

In more general terms the greater opportunities for individual self-expression and initiative inherent in the reforms have provided scope for the latent cravings for more autonomy and more wilful action. As the obligations for conformity are weakened the balance between group-orientated and self-orientated behaviour is slightly changed so that the former is less unchallenged. The speed and the enthusiasm of young Chinese in picking up the fashions and the popular culture of the outside world, particularly that of Hong Kong and Taiwan, is evidence of a new state of mind. Conformity is still extremely important but it is now tempered by a willingness to strive to be somewhat different, to stand out as an individual.[41]

This process of individuals becoming more autonomous has not, however, brought unmixed pleasure to most Chinese. Ingrained feelings and expectations linger on, and consequently there is widespread cynicism about the faltering Chinese state and anger because the Chinese do want an omnipotent authority as their benevolent protector.[42] Moreover, there is discomfort in living in a society in which it is normal and essential to dissemble much of the time. Thus the increasing ritualization of state–individual relations has produced a general feeling that the state has become more corrupt and that citizens in general have to tell lies in many situations. On both sides of the relationship there is a sense of increased immorality, especially in contrast to the supposed puritan standards of the Mao era.[43] Objectively measured, the level of corruption may not be much worse than is the norm for Third World countries, but subjectively legitimacy in China is still tied to the idea that the government should be the defender of a moral order. Therefore, if there is a decline in moral standards, the state is directly at fault.

41. Possibly the most vivid description of how young Chinese in particular have enthusiastically sought to find themselves by seeking out the fads and fashions of modern youth culture is Orville Schell's *Discos and Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

42. I have analysed the psychological bases for why disappointment with authority produces the reaction of anger in *The Spirit of Chinese Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

43. Even during the Mao period citizens had to engage in deception and questionable strategies to get ahead. For an excellent study of how that system forced people to act in immoral ways see Susan Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

The Individual as Part of a Lonely Crowd in a Floating Population

Structurally the most dramatic change in state–individual relations since the mid-1980s has been the rapid growth of a floating population of rural people coming into China's larger cities. These people are totally unattached to any collectivity and are in theory an illegal population. Estimates suggest that there may be as many as 100 million such "blind migrants." One tabulation suggests that every day as many as 10 million people are moving in and out of the 23 cities with a population of over one million.[44] Beijing has as many as 1,300,000 "blindly migrating" people, and nearly a quarter of Canton's population is in that category.[45] Xinhua News Agency reported on 6 August 1988 that nearly one in every 20 people in China is involved in the great population movement from the rural areas to the cities, and the daily numbers going in and out keep rising; in the case of Shanghai there were 700,000 in 1984, 850,000 in 1985, 1,346,000 in 1986, 1,900,000 in 1988 and 2,000,000 in 1989.[46]

The increasing numbers are easy to understand. First, the loosening of state controls – the household registration system, the personal dossiers and the rationing system – allowed Chinese peasants to flock to the cities to seek their fortunes wherever they heard that life was better. Secondly, the credit-tightening that came with the general austerity policies after 1988 caused many rural industries to close which pushed more people toward the cities. The rural unemployment problem was further compounded by the suspension of large-scale construction projects, and agricultural developments reduced the demand for field workers, liberating peasants from bondage to the land.[47]

This huge mobile population is seen as a threat to stability. They participated in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration. They continue to be a major source of violation of the one-child policy, with over 1,200,000 babies being born to migrants outside the plan. They are also said to have been identified with the spread of contagious diseases. Above all, however, they are seen as a potential criminal element. It is estimated that 25 per cent of the major crimes in Shanghai, such as murder, rape, robbery and prostitution, are committed by migrants; and in Guangzhou 90 per cent of the prostitutes are migrants.[48]

In the context of the Chinese tradition of collective responsibility it is understandable that not only the authorities but citizens in general have been frightened by such an influx of unaffiliated people and

44. Lin Wei, "Mangliu shehui dongluan de zhengzhao?" ("'Blind migration,' is it an omen of social upheaval?" *The Nineteen Nineties* (April 1989), pp. 53–55.

45. Deng Xinwei, "Zhonggong renkou zhengce yu dalu renkou wenti" ("The CCP's population policy and the population problem on the mainland"), *Zhonggou dalu* (*China Mainland*), No. 274 (August 1990), p. 20.

46. Shi Lei, "Renkou da liudong de chongji" ("The impact of the great population movement"), *Zhongguo zhi chun* (*China Spring*) (April 1989), pp. 47–48.

47. Lin Wei, "Blind migration," pp. 54–55.

48. Shi Lei, "The impact of the great population movement," p. 48.

suspect that they are criminally inclined. It is assumed that without the constraints of a bonding group people will act in anti-social ways. The fear is not without some foundation in fact. Crime has risen in Chinese cultural areas whenever controls are relaxed. In Taiwan, for example, there was a rise in crime with the ending of martial law which was only brought into check with the appointment as prime minister of the tough-minded general Hua Pei-tsun. Initially his appointment was greeted with fears that he was too close to the Old Guard of the Kuomintang, but after his anti-crime campaigns he was seen even by opposition leaders as a necessary law enforcer.[49]

An Upside-Down Safety Net

Although many of the Chinese are troubled by their floating population, it does not follow that they will turn out to be a source of serious social unrest. The rural people who have gone to the cities are individualists who are willing to take the initiative in looking after themselves. They are ready not only to take jobs without the benefit of the "iron rice bowl," but also to start their own services and even small enterprises, and so they become peddlers, cobblers, repairmen, tailors and the like.

The fact that China has been able to absorb such a huge number of essentially unemployed people without any substantial demands for new state services may be a source of stability rather than unrest. In a peculiar way in the topsy-turvy world of Chinese official practices, the government seems to have built for the country an upside-down safety net, in that it is the large, established state enterprises, with their "iron rice bowls," which cannot survive in a competitive world and are receiving massive subsidies; while the truly unemployed migrant individuals have to make it on their own, without any state help. This combination of unemployed and self-employed individuals looking after themselves and large, inefficient state enterprises getting government subsidies may turn out to be a formula for many years of stability for China. It could give China the same surface appearance of stability that the Soviet Union had during the Brezhnev era. But under the surface the strain of the subsidies and the distortion of the irrational price system will certainly produce eventually a crisis comparable to the one Gorbachev inherited.

The situation is made more troublesome because it is the migrants, with fewer skills and less education and technical competence, who have the greatest initiative, while those with the security of the subsidized state enterprises, who do not have to take initiative, have more technical competence. This mismatch of competence and initiative cannot help but work against China's modernization efforts. The same mismatch can be found in the activities of former Red Guards who missed out on schooling but are boldly ambitious.

49. *New York Times*, 29 October 1990, p. 15.

The dramatic increase in the flow of rural people to the cities obscures to some degree the fact that throughout Chinese society there has been a steady increase in people seeking greater autonomy. It is, of course, not just rural migrants but also city people who are striking out on their own in greater numbers. The increase in the number of small individual enterprises (*getihu*) and the somewhat larger individual enterprises (*siren qiye*) has continued in spite of the austerity programme of the state which began in late 1988.[50] In the post-Tiananmen state of national uncertainty in which the economy is partly centrally planned and partly responsive to market forces, it is possible to speak of China as having, like many semi-socialist Third World countries, a primary or formal economy under the control of the state, and a secondary or informal economy involving individuals struggling on their own to advance themselves. Whereas in the earlier days of the People's Republic everyone sought the security of the "iron rice bowl" of the state enterprises, it is now the independent entrepreneurs who are often the envy of others. The Chinese press is filled with complaints about the corruption of officials, particularly the sons and daughters of high cadres who use their status to make money in the private sector. Furthermore, since the enterprises in the informal economy generally do not pay all of the heavy surtaxes levied on them, it seems that increasing numbers of state enterprises feel that they too should try to avoid their taxes, to the extent that Chinese officials report that in 1989 tax evasion and under-reporting exceeded 80 billion *yuan*.[51] Thus the increasing initiative of Chinese individual citizens has affected the behaviour of officials so that cadres at all levels are manifesting more "individualism." Many people living on fixed incomes – such as scholars, doctors, scientists and other professional people – find that they are making far less than those in the market economy, and they complain that it is unreasonable that the more knowledge one has, the less money one earns; a state of affairs they characterize as *gongzi daogua* (wages are hanging upside down).[52]

Efforts to Build a New Relationship

The dual erosion of both state authority and the primary group identity structures could bring about a radical transformation in the long-standing character of the relationship of the state and the individual in China.

There is accumulating evidence that individuals are increasingly shaping their own identities less in terms of their primary group, whether the family or the *danwei*, and more in terms of the broad

50. See Thomas B. Gold, "Urban private business in China," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 22, No. 2–3 (Spring–Summer 1989), pp. 187–200.

51. "Top-to-bottom tax evasion," *Ming Pao Monthly*, (December 1990), pp. 8–10; translated in *Inside China Mainland*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (February 1991), pp. 15–16.

52. Personal communication from senior Chinese scholar.

strata of society, such as workers, migrants, students, intellectuals and the like. If this is the trend of the future it would represent for the individual a half-way point between the tradition of being a passive, parochial participant in face-to-face group structures and being an autonomous citizen capable of political relationships with the Chinese state. The blossoming artistic and literary creativity in the 1980s testifies to the straining in Chinese culture for greater individual self-expression. The "poisonous weeds" of early periods were allowed to reappear, and a whole generation of new voices was heard.[53] The Xi'an Film Studio produced works of exceptional artistic and intellectual creativity, such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum Well*; and there was the extraordinarily frank self-criticism of Chinese traditional culture, the six-part television documentary *River Elegy* (*He Shang*).[54]

A very significant but little noted feature of the democracy movement of spring 1989 was the informal associations that became the basis for mobilizing the students. Prior to the earlier democracy demonstration of 1986–87 there had been no significant informal clubs or societies on the various campuses, and thus the move toward political activism was disjointed, nearly leaderless, and guided by improvised strategies. After the return to normality following the purging of Hu Yaobang, Fang Lizhi and Liu Binyan, a significant development quietly took place among the students. While the government was absorbed with its "anti-spiritual pollution" rhetoric, the students at the leading Beijing universities began to create a variety of informal discussion groups according to their academic interests. Shen Tong, who was to become a major leader in Tiananmen Square, tells of how the biology students at Beijing University formed their meeting groups to advance their academic interests.[55] Then, when the situation was ripe for political action, the various groups were easily mobilized and the students knew they could trust the others because they had a more fundamental, non-political basis for associating with each other. The discussion groups were formed not solely with ulterior political purposes in mind but in part in the spirit of like-minded people seeking the personal advantages of association.

If in the future it becomes easier and more natural for the Chinese to come together to advance their shared private interests it will be the beginning of a true civil society. As they begin to build voluntary associations, the Chinese will develop the strength not only to check the state but to make effective demands on state policies. The result

53. Much of the best of the new writing has been translated in Geremie Barme and John Minford, *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988); Helen Siu and Zelda Stern, *Mao's Harvest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

54. For a discussion of the significance of this outburst of artistic creativity for state–society relations in China, see Gold, "Party-state versus society," pp. 143–45.

55. Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

will be a strengthening of both the autonomy of individuals and the authority of the state. If this were to happen the state would no longer be just a tool of a ruling elite with its own values and interests, but would become an institution responsive to the political preferences of society. And these preferences would represent the genuine interests of free individuals.

Such a development, however, is not likely to be a smooth one because the ambivalence about autonomy and dependence is too fundamental a feature of Chinese culture to be resolved so easily. As much as people may crave freedom, there remains the deep longing for the security of dependency. As an abstraction the picture of the lonely figure is attractive for the Chinese, but in practical terms their desire is more for the protection and support of a collectivity. The Chinese need for belonging is likely to create an even greater problem about individual freedom than the one Eric Fromm described for the Germans in his classic *Escape from Freedom*. For individual Chinese there are two levels of ambivalence that need to be resolved. In addition to the political ambivalence about freedom and dependency there is the more basic conflict between conforming and self-assertion. In short, the issue of individualism has yet to be resolved in Chinese culture. In the meantime the problem of human rights will continue to play an important part in the relations of the United States and some other countries with China. The process of working toward a new equilibrium in state–individual relations is certain to be filled with tensions, especially as officials sense the weakening of state authority and the increasing role of the people. It is an unfortunate but undeniable fact that the *modus operandi* of Chinese leaders, both traditional and contemporary, is to treat manifestations of individualism as obstreperous acts of disorder and a threat to legitimacy, and therefore cases for repression. Their basic distrust of individualism is reinforced by their conviction, strengthened by what they see happening in the Soviet Union, that it should be possible to have economic development without individual freedom. They seem to be blind to the fact that in their own country economic progress has been consistently correlated with a rise in individualistic tendencies. Thus progress, if it comes, will reduce the gap between state and individual in Chinese culture.